

The Concept and Characteristics of Classical, Renaissance and Modern Tragedies

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ABSTRACT: *Greek tragedy developed from rituals associated with the god Dionysus and remained religiously oriented throughout history. The tragedies were therefore, dramatic recreations of myths about conflict between generations as represented by gods and heroes. The characters of tragedy wore their mythical and legendary origins- except when Euripides stripped them of their glory and they retained the stature of historical figures from the heroic age. Thus, the tragic ideas of the playwrights include a conception of tragedy based on the religious views of the time period. Renaissance brought a secularization of the arts, literature and theatre. There was absolutely no connection between theatre and religion. It also brought the individualization of the human being as distinct from society in general. In Renaissance tragedy therefore, the entire emphasis is laid upon human action independent of destiny and the responsibility of the individual in bringing about his ruin. In keeping with Renaissance emphasis upon the infinite capacities of the individual, the Elizabethan tragedies particularly Shakespeare's explore the limits of man's action in this universe. Modern implies more than that which is current. It suggests a disinterest in the past and in the values and forms of that past. With the emergence of Ibsen in the late Nineteenth Century came the concept of middle class tragedy growing out of social problems and issues. The little man has gradually taken the place that the illustrious man presided over for many centuries. This paper examines the relationship between the concept and the characteristics of tragedy in the classical, Renaissance and the modern periods. The historical research methodology is employed to dissect the diversity of the tragic conception and characteristics of tragedy in the periods under study. It is established that the tragic conception and characteristics from the time of the Greeks to the present has undergone a metamorphosis in definitions and experience.*

KEY WORDS: Concept of tragedy, characteristics of tragedy, *Oedipus the King, Antigone, Macbeth, Othello, Death of a Salesman*

INTRODUCTION

Theatre and drama in Greece were in part an outgrowth of Greek rituals and religious practice. Tragedy has its origin in ancient Greek theatre and reached its peak in the fifth century B.C. The

structure of the plays bears some resemblance to their religious festivals. A brief understanding of Greek religion in the fifth century B.C therefore, will be a helpful beginning for a discussion of the concept of Classical tragedy.

The development of Greek religion and particularly of the worship of Dionysus is one of the critical elements in the formation of tragedy. Emeka Nwabueze observes that, "Religion and politics played an important part in the development of Greek drama. The Greeks were very much attached to their gods. As a result, Greek tragedy arose from religious festivals and Dionysian rites (...)" (22).

The Greeks were flexible in their religious views. Watson and Mckernie, support the above, when they state that:

They (Greeks) adapted to new influxes of religious thought, and they accepted the god of races that invaded their territory. From this, they evolved a polytheistic faith or belief in many gods, which emphasized the relationship of the Hellenes to the world around them. They accepted the presence of a force beyond them and they articulated that presence by giving it names for each situations. (...) That the characters of Greek drama so frequently appeal to the gods, then, was not the desire to blame somebody else for their actions. Instead, it was a genuine acknowledgement that individuals are not isolated in the world, but are part of an organic whole that includes forces beyond human understanding. (15)

Renaissance is a period of European history which succeeded the middle ages. Two events in the middle of the Fifteenth Century accelerated the explosion of Renaissance: firstly, the fall of Constantinople to Muslims in 1453, which resulted in the flight of many Greek scholars to Italy bringing with them the writings of ancient Greek writers which consequently triggered intense interest in Greek and Roman traditions. Secondly, the importation of the printing press invented by Johannes Gutenberg in 1464 into Italy which made the quick widespread publication of the classics and the ideas they triggered possible. Several new ideas began to spread through Europe during this period, undermining the assumptions and attitudes associated with medieval institutions and encouraging writers and artists to explore the world in new and revolutionary ways. Permeating all these developments were two clusters of ideas and experiences: stagecraft and humanism.

The modern theatre can be said to date from about 1850's when Ibsen started writing in the realistic mode. Its recognizable origin lies in the social and political upheaval that developed out of the enlightenment and dominated Europe and American culture in the Nineteenth Century. The Nineteenth Century was an important period of transition for the theatre. It was a time of change and preparation for the dramatic explosion that would follow. It opened with the flowering of the Romantic Movement and ended with a strong movement towards the realistic theatre. For the Nineteenth Century middle class, the theatre had been a source of entertainment, a provider of laughs, glitter and maudlin sentimentality. But voices began to make themselves heard that the

time had come to put the theatre-drama back in its culture as a place of serious reflection on the state of society. Ibsen reflected the new idea about the functions of the arts. No longer was the drama merely to make people feel good, it should in the words of Martin Esslin, "Become a branch of scientific inquiry, an experimental laboratory to explore human relations presenting images of the world and society as it really was with all its ugliness, all its blemishes, all the aspect of human existence which hitherto had been regarded as unmentionable in public". (344).

This paper aims to pinpoint the basic concepts and characteristics of tragedy in the Classical, Renaissance and the Modern periods. However, due to the vast geographical coverage of the aforementioned periods, there is also a need to delimit the scope of the ages; thus for the classical period, I will be restricted to the classical Greece, in the Renaissance, to the Elizabethan Period and the Modern Period which starts from the late nineteenth century when Ibsen started writing in the realistic mode.

CONCEPT OF CLASSICAL, RENAISSANCE AND MODERN TRAGEDIES

The Greek classical tragedy was an outgrowth of what was happening then in Athens. A study of the tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides show that ancient Greek tragedy is basically modeled upon an essentially religious *weltanschauung*. Accordingly, most Greek tragedies represent the philosophy of men's puny insignificance in the face of a colossal divine power that controls and mostly destroys human life. The utter helplessness of men in his struggle against divine power is the substance of Classical Greek tragedy. Emphasis is laid upon the inscrutable power of fate or destiny, capable of bringing about havoc or ruin to the human life. To the Greeks, fate is an irrevocable predetermined, foreordained scheme of life laid down for all men by the gods. In such a world, there can be no free will. Perhaps, one can clearly understand the meaning of fate from Bradley's view that:

Fate appears to be a mythological expression for the whole system or order, of which the individual characters form inconsiderable and feeble part; which seems to determine, far more than they, their native dispositions, and their circumstances and through these their action, which is so vast and complex that they can scarcely at all understand it or control its workings and which has a nature so definite and fixed that whatever changes take place in it produce other changes inevitably and without regard to man's desires and regrets. (34)

Humanism is a philosophical and literary movement in the Renaissance in which man and his capabilities are the central concern. Humanism which was at the centre of Renaissance is the belief that was first expressed by the Greek philosopher, Protagoras when he said that, "Man is the measure of all things". The impact of humanism on the theatre was great. There was reawakening of interest in the ideas of Greek and Roman writers and thinkers. In addition, humanism fostered a new conception of the individual which in turn influenced the conception of character in drama. Renaissance characters lived in the now and tested themselves by expanding their capabilities, in

contrast to medieval characters whose focus is on the world to come. Thus in the Renaissance theatre, man is the centre of the universe, he stands there as “the total man, complete with marrow, sinew, desire, will and mind. The character’s objective in Renaissance drama is to effectuate himself in a world of desire, and his pursuit of it leads to pleasure on one hand and to tragedy on the other. (Gassner: *A Treasury* 215).

Renaissance fostered an increased surge of individualism allowing people to believe that in the words of Leon Battista Alberti, “Men can do all things if they will”. Pico della Mirandola, a Florentine writer also stated in his “On the Dignity of Man”, that there are no limits placed on what man can accomplish. Mirandola’s rationalization was that man was not the subject of fate or God; rather that he controls his own destiny. Jerry Pickering also notes that, “For humans, people of Renaissance believed almost nothing was impossible. This confidence in people’s infinite capacity contributed immensely to the great music, art, literature and the scientific and geographic discoveries of the period. It was an explosive age, a diverse age, an age that could breed a Machiavelli alongside a Petrarch and feel comfortable with both of them. (142).

Consequently, even peasants, the dredges of European society, believed and were allowed to believe they could achieve a level of intellectual intelligence equal to the great classical philosophers. For instance, Renaissance artists like Michelangelo, writers and philosophers like Petrarch and Machiavelli and even the Popes were somewhat of a peasant heritage.

Renaissance theatre was that of action, often reaching violence. Tragic situations alternated with grossly farcical ones, rhetoric, bombast and blood flowed freely in the plays; battles and murders sparked the action. This was due to the influence of Senecan plays. The Fifth Century Greek tragic art did not provide a pattern for Renaissance theatre. This was because; Greek tragedy having been largely forgotten in the middle ages, Seneca’s plays came to be regarded after the Thirteenth Century as the only examples of classical drama. Extremely influential during the Renaissance, they set the standard for the later dramas. The Elizabethans were indebted to Seneca for certain character types: the ghost, the messenger, the confidant; for certain expository or dramatic device: the use of soliloquy; for certain sensational themes: revenge, incest and most importantly, for conveying a sense of the inner life of a dramatic character. Renaissance brought a secularization of the arts, literature and theatre. There was absolutely no connection between theatre and religion. It also brought the individualization of the human being as distinct from society in general. In Renaissance tragedy therefore, the entire emphasis is laid upon human action independent of destiny and the responsibility of the individual in bringing about his ruin.

The thought of modern tragedy was influenced by the four great streams of discovery and statement called Positivism, Darwinism, Marxism and Freudianism. Auguste Comte whose theory is called positivism said that the best scientific research focused only on measurable data and led to a cause-and-effect explanation of reality, once the causes were known, he said they could be manipulated to produce the desired effect. Comte taught that the highest and most complicated of the sciences was sociology because the goal of all knowledge is understanding and improving

human society. In response to Comte's ideas, theatrical realists focused on material reality and believed that by honestly portraying the ills of society, they were helping to improve the world. Charles Darwin maintained that man's life is shaped by his social and physical environment, that he lives in a world where survival belongs to the fittest i.e. to the biologically strong, to the ruthless. Karl Marx posed the same question of survival but equated it with economic warfare where the individual is caught in an historic movement which pitted the haves against the have-nots. Sigmund Freud turned the struggle for survival inward and made man the victim of his inner drives, the libido and the ego. The impact of the ideas of Comte, Darwin, Marx and Freud are profound and are typical in their revision of Nineteenth Century thought. Modernism is therefore characterized by a variety of styles and movements. However, "whether the playwright is primarily concerned with one or the other of these concepts, his construct puts man at the centre of the theatre where he has always been – struggling desperately to express himself, to find a meaning for his existence, to commit himself to something larger than himself, to find his true nature and to give his life some meaning". (Vera Roberts *The Nature of Tragedy* 169)

Modernism is a complete break from the past and freedom to redefine convention. Whether naturalistic, realistic, symbolist or surrealist, playwrights of the modern era have not felt it necessary to replicate works of earlier eras: there has been little or no conscious rebirth of classical theory or practice in the modernist plays of Ibsen, Chekhov, Brecht, Beckett etc., which came to represent all that was happening to Europe at the end of the Nineteenth Century. The Twentieth Century was a frantic period and a highly complex one. What! With the Cataclysmic events of the Twentieth Century: the two world wars, the great technological change, the destructive use of atomic power and the disintegration of family and community life. No one was prepared for the long duration of World War 1, or for the more than 30 million casualties of the war. People were disenchanted with their governments for having led them into war. Everywhere new ideas about the nature of humankind were debated and many of these ideas suggested that individuals really had no control over their destinies. Given these events, it comes as no surprise that writers and dramatists responded to world conditions with discussions of alienation and anxiety. To the modern playwright, man's very existence is tragic and terrifying and the mere fact of survival is an act of heroism.

Watson and Mckernie rightly observe that:

Political upheavals are commonplace in human history, but in the period from 1880 – 1920, they took on a size and importance seldom seen before. The impact of World War 1 on the conscience of Europe cannot be overestimated. The impact of the war generated a mood of anger and despair in artists in the post war period. From this incredible explosion of political events came a number of ideas that greatly influenced the way in which modern dramatists view their characters and their world. (356)

As a literary style, modern has one common characteristic- that each artist seeks truth from his or her own personal perspective. The meaning of life is variously found in the motivations of

characters, in the relationship of society and individuals, in the daily events of less-than-monarchical figures, and in the relationship between subconscious thoughts and conscious perceptions. Characters are motivated by forces that seem beyond them, and events occur that suggest that an individual does not have control over his destiny. The modern period and its drama were shaped by the world-changing forces such as industrial- technological revolution, democratic revolution and an intellectual revolution that would disrupt earlier conceptions of time, space, the divine, human psychology and social order. As a result theatre of challenge and experimentation emerged. One of theatre's greatest periods continues today.

The Greeks had a Theocentric vision, while the Elizabethans motivated by the Renaissance, laid stress on the vision of an anthropocentric universe. In keeping with Renaissance emphasis upon the infinite capacities of the individual, the Elizabethan tragedies particularly Shakespeare's explore the limits of man's action in this universe. Hence while the crux of the tragic action lay with the divine power in Greek tragedies, the individual hero and his actions were of prime importance in Shakespearean tragedy. With the emergence of Ibsen in the late Nineteenth century came the concept of middle class tragedy growing out of social problems and issues.

Having discussed and understood the broad principles that affected drama and theatre in the ages under study, an exploration of the characteristics of tragedy in the different periods will be undertaken using Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* and *Antigone*; Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and *Othello*, and Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* as representative texts for the different ages.

CHARACTERISTICS OF GREEK TRAGEDY

Plot of Tragedy

The plot of Greek tragedy is nearly always based on an episode from legends or the myths of the gods. The only unique exception is Aeschylus' *The Persians* which is based on historical events. *Oedipus the King* and *Antigone* are both drawn from the storehouse of legends.

The legend of *Oedipus the King*: Laius, the King of Thebes was warned that if he had a son, that son would grow up to kill his father. When Oedipus was born, Laius pierced the child's ankles, bound them together and gave him to a servant to abandon on the mountain outside the city. The servant spared the baby's life and gave him to a foreign shepherd to look after. The shepherd took the child to his home in Corinth where he was adopted by Polybus and Merope, the king and queen of Corinth. When Oedipus grew up and was taunted by a drunk with not being the true son of his parents, he consults the Delphic oracle and learnt of his fate to kill his father and marry his mother. He ran away and resolved never to return to Corinth. On his way, he met and killed a man and his attendants without knowing that the man is his father. His wanderings took him to Thebes where he answered the riddle of the Sphinx, a monster attacking the city. Due to gratitude, the Thebes made Oedipus king, he thus inherited the queen Jocasta, thereby bringing to fulfillment the second part of the prophecy.

The legend of *Antigone*: Two sons, Eteocles and Polyneices and two daughters, Antigone and Ismene, were born to the incestuous marriage between Oedipus and Jocasta. The two sons fell out over their inheritance. The elder, Eteocles broke the initial agreement and drove his brother into exile. Polyneices married the daughter of the king of Argos and returned with a foreign army to take his inheritance by force. The two brothers killed each other in the battle and the rule of the city fell to Creon, Jocasta's brother. He ordered that Eteocles should be buried with full honor while Polyneices' body should remain unburied. This meant that his soul would be denied passage to the world of the dead: it was equivalent of eternal damnation. Antigone resolved to defy the edict and bury Polyneices herself. She was captured in the act and was condemned to death by Creon.

ABSENCE OF DEATH AND ACT OF VIOLENCE ON STAGE

Greek tragedy did not allow death or any act of violence on stage. Sophocles' *Ajax* is an exception. Although Greek tragedies concern themselves with death, battle, murder, the bloodier events take place off-stage. We do not see the events themselves, but we see the results in dead bodies, blinded eyes etc. Thus, stage death is conspicuously avoided though the plays are full of death and dying. Messengers were frequently used to relate the information about death or violent action. For instance, in *Oedipus the King*, it was a messenger that brought the news of Queen Jocasta's death and of Oedipus blinding his own eyes:

MESSENGER: You are spared the worst of what has happened – you were not there to see it. But as far as memory serves, you shall hear the full story of that unhappy woman's suffering. She came in through the door in a fury of passion and rushed straight towards her marriage bed, tearing at her hair with both hands. Into her bedroom she went, and slammed the doors behind her. (...) And after that – I do not know exactly how she died. For Oedipus came bursting in, shouting and so we could not watch Jocasta's suffering to the end; all of us looked at him as he ran to and fro. He rushed from one of us to the other, asking us to give him a sword, to tell him where he could find his wife – no not his wife, but his mother. (...) It must have been some supernatural being that showed the raving man where she was, it was not one of us (...) and there we saw Jocasta, hanging, her neck caught in a swinging noose of rope. When Oedipus saw her, he gave a deep dreadful cry of sorrow. He ripped out the golden pins with which her clothes were fastened, raised them high above his head and speared the pupils of his eyes. And each time the wounded eyes sent a stream of blood down his chin, no oozing flow but a dark shower of it, thick as a hailstorm. (93 -94)

In *Antigone*, it was also messenger that reported the death of Antigone, Haemon and Eurydice. Arnott points out that "Although Greek plays are full of death and dying, on only two occasions in the whole Greek tragedy does death actually occur on stage". (35)

MUSICAL CHORAL INTERLUDE

In Greek tragedy, dancing and music were integral parts of the whole, not occasional adjuncts. The series of episode that comprised the action were joined or separated by the choral odes – the *stasima*. Occasionally, a *stasimon* is replaced by a *commos*, which is a lyric passage sung by an actor or actors together with the chorus. Greek tragedy evolved from the chorus of the *dithyrambs* and their functions cannot be overemphasized. The functions of the chorus varied from one playwright to the next and also varied according to the action of a particular play. However, certain functions are reflected in the works of many playwrights which include: firstly, that the chorus is an actor in a play; secondly, that the chorus almost always aligns sympathetically with the protagonist; thirdly, they provide the social and historical background of the play, filling pertinent gaps in time and space; fourthly, that the chorus frequently participated in the action, urging the protagonist to follow a particular course of action or withholding information from another character. The chorus in *Antigone* for instance is made up of Theban elders. Towards the end, they urge the king, Creon towards revoking his decisions.

CREON: What's to be done? Tell me and I will do it.

CHORUS: Go free the girl from her prison in the rocks and give the corpse an honorable tomb.

CREON: Is this your advice? You think that I should yield?

CHORUS: Yes, lord, as quickly as you can. The gods move to cut short man's stupidity.

CREON: It is hard; but I resign my dear resolve. We cannot fight against necessity. (83)

Fifthly, the Greek chorus added colour, movement and spectacle as it sang and danced the choral interlude. Aristotle is of the opinion that “The chorus too should be regarded as one of the actors; it should be an integral part of the whole, and share in the action”. (48)

THE UNITIES

Mistaken interpretation of *Poetics* ascribed the rule of the three unities: action, time and place to Aristotle. Aristotle mentioned time and action. However, the one principle of unity which he does set forth unambiguously is that of unified and complete action which must be a whole, “the structural union of the parts being such that if any one of them is displaced or removed, the whole will be disjointed and disturbed. For a thing whose presence or absence makes no visible difference, is not an organic part of the whole” (*Poetics* 39)

Greek tragedy therefore confines itself most remarkably to what is essential to the tragic theme of the play. Nothing is done which the development of the tragic idea does not directly demand. Aristotle did not say anything about the unity of place, although it was customary for Greek tragedies to have a single locale with the exception of Sophocles' *Ajax*. Perhaps the continual presence of the chorus influenced this practice for after the Parados, the chorus does not leave the stage till the Exodus. On Unity of time, Aristotle wrote that “Tragedy endeavour as far as possible to confine itself to a single revolution of the sun, or but slightly exceed this limit”. For instance the action of *Oedipus the King* takes place on the last day of Oedipus' rule at Thebes and in front of his palace. *Antigone* also has one locale – Before the palace of Creon in Thebes. The

actions of the plot in the two plays, completed within “a single revolution of the sun”. The point of attack began where the action would develop to the end within the same day and previous actions were artistically scattered into various points of dialogue within the present action.

COMIC RELIEF

Comic relief was excluded from tragedy. Its place being taken by the satyr plays which were performed after the tragic trilogies. The only complete extant satyr today is Euripides’ *Cyclops*, fragments of Sophocles’ *Trackers* also survived.

DEATH OF THE TRAGIC HERO

Greek tragedy does not end in the death of the tragic hero but with the community’s reflection upon the significance of the life which has just come to an end. Aristotle’s definition of tragedy does not include an unfortunate or fatal conclusion as a necessary component of tragedy. In *Oedipus the King* and *Antigone* for example, the protagonists did not die. In *Oedipus*, the king inflicts his own punishment by blinding himself, but he goes into exile instead of dying.

OEDIPUS: Apollo, friends, Apollo –
Apollo brought these woes to pass;
But it was my own hand that struck.
My own hand alone, man of misery that I am!
I did not want to see when sight could show me
Nothing good. (...) Hurry lead me out of the land,
Lead away the lost one, the most damned of men,
The man most abhorred by the gods. (49)

To the Greeks, man emerges at birth from an unknown existence and returns to another at death. Consequently, to the Greek dramatists, in death it means that the future either does not exist or is closed and without significance. In *Oedipus the King*, the future is unimaginable as all attention is directed backward to former deeds. Thus to continue living with his knowledge of incest and patricide is the height of suffering even worse than death.

Creon, too did not die at the end of *Antigone*. After the death of his son and wife, he exclaims:

CREON: Oh deadly end of stubborn sins
Born in the blindness of understanding!
See here, a son dead, a father who killed him.
Oh the fatal workings of my mind;
My son, to die so young,
So soon to be taken from me
By my folly, not by yours.

CHORUS: Perhaps you see now too late what was best.

CREON: Yes, I have learned my bitter lesson.
Some god must have chosen that moment

To crush me under his heavy hand
And hurl me into cruelty's ways,
Riding roughshod over all I held dear.
Oh, mankind, you were born to suffer! (85)

Although it has been argued that Antigone is the protagonist, she does not experience a requirement of classical Greek protagonist: *Anagnorisis* – a moment of truth in which the protagonist recognizes and acknowledges his mistakes, failures or sins. It is Creon that experiences this recognition. This is evident in his foregoing speech.

LANGUAGE

The language of Greek tragedy is verse, the customary medium for ceremonial performances. Arnott states that:

When actors converse with each other, Greek tragedy regularly uses a strict form of dialogue called stichomythia, in which one character speaks a complete verse line, to be answered by another complete verse line from the other (...). The pattern is rhythmical and regular and lines are rarely split between speakers, as they so often are in later verse drama. (38)

STATUS

A Greek tragedy focuses on a great and noble character; the protagonist is a person of noble birth and stature. Oedipus is a king, and so also is Creon. For example, Creon's kingship is revealed in the following statement of the Chorus:

CHORUS: (...) But here comes our country's ruler,
Creon, Menoeceus', our new lord
By the gods' new dispensation. (71)

CHARACTERISTICS OF SHAKESPEAREAN TRAGEDY

William Shakespeare is considered the greatest playwright in the English language and arguably the world. Shakespeare enriched the stage with some of its most fascinating and enduring characters. Shakespeare created characters that have meaning beyond the time and place of his plays. These characters struggle just as people do in real life, some are successful and some end up with painful and tragic failure. It is impossible to summarize features of Shakespearean tragedy for each creates a distinctive world, self-enclosed. Nevertheless, some general features can be identified that reveal the major characteristics of his plays and his genius.

PLOT

Shakespeare's works were based on classical legends, history, biographies, Italian tales, English and Scottish Chronicles and even plays by earlier writers. Pickering observes that "Shakespeare was not original in the purest sense (...). In his plots – all but two of his plays can be traced to a specific source and one may suspect that if the material were available, even the two works would prove to be lifted from an earlier work" (218). Shakespeare for instance took the story of *Othello* from an existing romance and adapted it for his own purposes. *Othello* takes its plot from the

history based on the Italian short story *Un Capitano Moro* (A Moorish Captain) by Giovanni Battista Giraldi Cinthio, first published in 1565. *Macbeth* was an attempt to piece together some events in Scottish and English history. There had actually been a Macbeth, who lived in the Eleventh Century Scotland. Bernard Lott points out that: Macbeth, Duncan, Malcolm and Macdonald, appear in a number of old works on the history of Scotland. But each of these sources tells a somewhat different story, and it is certain that Shakespeare's main source was one particular book, Raphael Holinshed's second edition of *Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland*, published in 1586. (Introduction XIII)

Shakespeare, however did not follow the trend of Holinshed's story but like Lott noted, "there is, of course nothing wrong in this because Shakespeare is making a play, not writing history, and the interest of the plot lies in the way the incidents are brought together to make a complete and quickly moving story". (XIII)

STATUS

Shakespeare's tragedy is concerned with persons of high level: often with princes – Hamlet; or Kings - King Lear; leaders in the state - Julius Ceasar or at least members of great houses – The Capulets and the Montagues. Othello is the General of the Republic of Venice. Macbeth is a General in King Duncan's army and later became a king. Shakespeare created characters that have meaning beyond the time and place of his plays. These characters struggle just as people do in real life, some are successful and some end up with painful and tragic failure. These protagonists are portrayed as believable human beings. Their traits may include: strength of character as in Othello; foolish vanity as in King Lear, and even treachery as in Macbeth. Tragedy derives mostly from the protagonist's own actions, not performed in ignorance or as casual mistakes, but deeds characteristics to his or her nature. Othello's downfall in *Othello* for instance is entirely his own doing. Although, Iago is clearly the catalyst, Othello partly feeds his own jealousy which led to his destruction.

INTRODUCTION OF THE SUPERNATURAL

In some Shakespearean tragedies, there are introductions of the supernatural. Shakespeare introduces ghosts, witches who have supernatural knowledge: Hecate, The Three Witches, Banquo's Ghost, and other Apparitions in *Macbeth*. These were carried over from medieval drama-one of the influences that intruded into Renaissance drama. However, though the witches present in *Macbeth* have supernatural powers, Shakespeare did not intend to portray a classic case of fatalism, rather he used *Macbeth* to display the idea of Renaissance humanism. Even though the witches' prophecies on Macbeth are very great, it is just an influence and nothing more. Thus, the witches were not controlling Macbeth; rather they were tempting him to act in particular ways and did not in any way determine his actions. Macbeth's downfall can be traced to the actions of one man, Macbeth. The following statements confirm this:

MACBETH: (...) I will tomorrow, And betimes I will to the weird sisters
More shall they speak, for now I am bent to know,

By the worst means, the worst.
For mine own good, All causes shall give way: I am in blood stepped
in so far, that should I wade no more, Returning were as tedious as go
O'er strange things I have in head, that will to hand
Which must be acted, ere they may be scanned. (131)

SOLILOQUY AND ASIDES

The Renaissance theatre picked up from Seneca, the device of the internalizing monologue, asides and the soliloquy which punctuates the action. Thus, soliloquy is universally associated with Shakespeare's great tragic heroes. It is one of the principal means by which he created a direct relationship between his characters and his audience. The purposes of the soliloquy include; revealing the mood of the speaker and the reason for it, revealing motives of the speaker, revealing the character's opinion of someone else in the play; preparing the audience for subsequent developments; explaining matters that would ordinarily require another scene, reviewing past events or indicating speaker attitudes. Typically, Shakespeare's soliloquies deal with major decisions and challenges faced by a character in a time of crisis and change. In *Othello*, decision to murder Desdemona for her 'supposed' adultery was revealed in a soliloquy. In that singular speech, Othello's mood, the reasons for it and the motives for his decision are revealed. The audience is also prepared for subsequent developments.

OTHELLO: It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul.
Let me not name it to you, you chaste stars;
It is the cause. Yet I'll not shed her blood,
Nor scar that whiter skin of hers than snow
And smooth as monumental alabaster
Yet she must die, else she'll betray more men. (...). (121)

Asides are also characteristic of Shakespeare's tragedy. It is usually a speech intended only for the audience or occasionally for one other character on stage. Asides are typically short, in order to avoid interference with the course of the play. Asides are usually employed to draw attention to the significance of what has been said or done; to explain plot development; to create humour by introducing a witty comment or to create suspense by foreshadowing. Macbeth's reaction to Duncan's pronouncement that Malcolm will be his successor is a foreshadow of subsequent developments.

MACBETH: The prince of Cumberland! - That is a step
on which I must fall down, or else o'erleap,
For in my way it lies. Stars, hide your fires!
Let not light see my black and deep desires;
The eye wink at the hand, yet let that be,
Which the eye fears, when it is done, to see. (31)

THE UNITIES

Shakespeare disregarded the three unities of Action, Place and Time. Most of his tragedies contain a sub plot or a set of secondary characters that extend the meaning and impact of the play to all human activity. He abused the unities of place and time by jumping from one location to another within the same play and created differences in time of the actions up to months and even years. *Othello* for instance begins in Venice, shifts to and ends in Cyprus. *Macbeth* also has more than one location. This deviation is typical of most Renaissance drama. Gassner observes that “In the most vital areas of Renaissance drama, professional playwrights generally ignored, resisted or circumvented the rules. Only two of Shakespeare’s many plays, *The Comedy of Error* and *The Tempest*, were unified to the satisfaction of the humanist scholars”. (214)

COMIC RELIEF

Comic relief is an amusing scene; incident or speech in a serious or tragic setting intended to provide temporary relief from tension or to intensify the dramatic action. There is often an intermixture of comic scenes in Shakespeare’s tragedies. Shakespeare introduced comic relief in *Othello* in the speech of the clown and in *Macbeth* in the speeches of the Porter. Hear the following conversation:

Clown: Why, masters, have your instruments been in
Naples, that they speak i’th’ nose thus?
Musician: How, sir, how? (*Othello* 75)

The clown says that the musical instrument sounds out of tune. The Porter’s scene in *Macbeth* is also a good example of a comic relief.

MACDUFF: Was it so late, friend, ere you went to bed, that you do lie so late?

PORTER: Faith, sir, we were carousing till the second cock;
And drink, sir, is a great provoker of three things.

MACDUFF: What three things does drink especially provoke?

PORTER: Marry, Sir, nose-painting, sleep and urine. Lechery, Sir, it provokes and unprovokes: it provokes the desire, but it takes away the performance. Therefore, much drink may be said to be an equivocator with lechery: it makes him and it mars him; but it sets him on, and it takes him off; it persuades him, and disheartens him; makes him stand to, and not stand to: in conclusion, equivocates him in a sleep, and, giving him the lie, leaves him.

MACDUFF: I believe drink gave thee the lie last night. (67-69)

The comic relief is used to interrupt a succession of intensely tragic moments. For instance, in *Macbeth*, just before the Porter’s scene, Duncan has been murdered, and the scene is dark and

disturbing. The porter's appearance interrupts this image of great tragedy by giving the audience a well-deserved comic relief. Not only does it offer a respite from the otherwise unrelenting dark material of *Macbeth*, but it also heightens the drama and tragedy of the preceding scene by comparison.

SCENES OF DEATH AND VIOLENCE ON STAGE

Shakespeare departed from classical practice by presenting scenes of violent passion, deaths and battles on stage instead of confining them to narrative report as in the classical manner. Like Gassner points out, "Tragic situations alternated with grossly farcical ones; rhetoric, bombast and blood flowed freely in the plays; battles and murders sparked the action (...) Poetry, soliloquies, asides and a broad acting were in place" (216). In *Othello*, the deaths of Othello and Desdemona, and others happened on stage and not reported. In *Macbeth*, battles and horrifying scenes like the witches scenes were also presented on stage.

LANGUAGE

Shakespearean tragedies are written mostly in verse. However, his mixture of style in language is worthy of note. He does not mind moving from poetry to prose and back again when it suits him or from the most elevated language to plain speech. Arnott rightly observes that:

In its language, however, Elizabethan drama was much less rigid than the Greek. Rhyming verse could be used; so could prose, and there is often a social differentiation, verse denoting the upper, prose the lower classes (...) Shakespeare's play conspicuously delight in the word play, elaborate flights of rhetorical fancy and particularly puns, many of which are lost on modern audiences because words have become obsolete or pronunciations have changed. (181)

The speeches of the Porter in *Macbeth* are in prose. So is Macbeth's letter to his wife and also in Lady Macbeth's sleep walking scene. In *Othello*, Act IV, Scene I, Othello speaks in prose till the moment when Iago tells him that Cassio has confessed. Shakespeare's mixture of prose and verse may be explained by the fact that he almost without exceptions put prose in the mouth of his low characters and the insane. The verse of Shakespeare's drama falls naturally into two parts: blank verse that is unrhymed lines in iambic pentameter (a sequence of ten alternately unstressed and stressed syllables), and rhymed lines in various metres.

CHANCE AND ACCIDENT

In most of Shakespearean tragedies, chance or accident plays an appreciable influence at some point in the action. For example, it was an accident that Desdemona dropped her handkerchief at the most fatal of moments. It was also by chance that Duncan dined and passed the night at Macbeth's the night of his murder. Each play contains an element of hope that is disappointed or ambition that is frustrated. Example, in *Macbeth*, Macbeth murders Duncan with the assurance of

good reward: He also enters battle with what seems to be positive assurance because He was told by the witches to:

2 APPARITION: Be bloody, bold and resolute: laugh to scorn the power of man, for none of woman born, Shall harm Macbeth” (149)

Macbeth was also told by the 3 APPARITION to:

3 APPARITION: Be lion-mettled, proud, and take no care Who chafes, who frets or where conspirers are: Macbeth shall never vanquished be, until Great Birnam wood to Dunsinane hill shall come against him. (151).

It is only when it is too late does Macbeth realize that he is being led to his destruction.

DEATH OF THE HERO

A very prominent part of Shakespeare’s tragedy is death of the protagonists. Bradley notes that Shakespeare’s tragedy is “preeminently the story of one person even though other persons are involved. The story leads up to and includes the death of the hero (...). Whatever may be true of tragedy, no play at the end of which the hero remains alive is, in the full Shakespeare’s sense of a tragedy. (17)

To the Renaissance society, death is important in expressing tragedy because it is at the very heart of the paradox of disappointment. For secular man, death brings final conclusive disillusionment to every meaningful hope. It is the embodiment of defeat.

THE EMERGENCE OF THE COMMON MAN

Romanticism had lost much of its appeal by the mid-nineteenth century; because the belief in humanity’s idealistic nature had received many setbacks- oppressive political conditions; industrial revolution and so on. The romanticist’s longing for idealism was too vague and impractical. Consequently, people argued that dreams must be abandoned for reality. By 1850 a conscious movement toward realism in theatre was emerging.

Modern drama began in the 1850s when Ibsen started writing in the realistic mode. Ibsen reflected the new idea about the functions of the arts, no longer was drama merely to make people feel good, “it should become a branch of scientific inquiry, an experimental laboratory to explore human relations presenting images of the world and society as it really was, with all its ugliness, all its blemishes, all the aspects of human existence which hitherto had been regarded unmentionable in public”. (Esslin 334)

The history of theatre from the Eighteenth to the present Centuries is one of the increasing commercialization of the art, accompanied by technological innovations, the introduction of serious critical review, expansion of the subject matters portrayed to include ordinary people and an emphasis on more natural forms of acting. In modernist literature, the definition of tragedy has become less precise. The most fundamental change has been the rejection of Aristotle’s dictum that true tragedy can only depict those with power and high status. Arthur Miller’s essay, “Tragedy

and the Common Man” exemplifies the modern belief that tragedy may also depict ordinary people in domestic surroundings. Modern heroes and heroines are molded and controlled by their society. They have no power to alter society; instead, they are at the mercy of the society for their own character. Thus, the fate decreed from the gods of classical Greek tragedy is replaced by the will of the institutions that shape the fate of the individual through policies and practices. Modern tragedy therefore as pointed out by Maeterlinck’ “ Does not make serious appeal to a determined divinity or fatality, it has fallen back on itself and seeks to discover in the regions of psychology and of moral problems, the equivalent of what once was offered by exterior life”. (70)

The above is in line with O’Neil Eugene’s remark that, “the playwright today must dig at the roots of the sickness of today – the death of the old God and the future of science and materialism”. (329)

The Twentieth century forward is the time when the common man could be noticed, exalted and compared to characters and tragic figures of earlier periods. The world of the mundane material life is central. As long as the real, the tangible, the ordinary is represented on the stage, then the audience can have a pathetic response to the material. Realism breeds proximity and the closer to the real world the audience is, the more it feels for the characters.

The characteristics of modern tragedy will be analysed under the following headings, namely, subject, status, language and death of the hero.

SUBJECT

The subject of modern tragedy is not drawn from myth or legend, neither is it man –god relationship. Rather, playwrights are concerned with issues of contemporary daily life. The issues bothering the middleclass are always the topic of modern tragedy. Society may serve as the oppressor of our modern tragic man without means to fight his battle, protect himself or his family or to seek moral intellectual guidance he may have been poorly served by an uncaring and unkind society. The hero of modern tragedy frequently appears as the victim of circumstances. Circumstances, environment, forces, outside of himself often drive him into a situation from which he cannot emerge victorious. Maeterlinck notes that in modern tragedy, “there is no longer a god to widen or master the action nor is there an exorable fate to form a mysterious solemn and tragic background for the slightest gesture of man (...). (69)

Death of a Salesman addresses the painful conflicts within one family and also tackles larger issues regarding American national values. Things that Willy considers meaningful, such as past sales records and prior friendships mean nothing in his current world. Willy Loman challenges faceless bureaucrats, insensitive children, and an impersonal capitalistic economic system – not gods, ghosts or fates. A case in point is Howard firing Willy from his sales job after thirty-four years of service, which can be likened to eating the orange and throwing the peel away like Willy says.

WILLY: I am talking about your father. There were promises made across this desk. You mustn’t tell me you’ve got people to see – I put thirty –four years into this firm,

Howard, and now I can't pay my insurance! You can't eat the orange and throw the peel away – a man is not a piece of fruit (...).

HOWARD: Willy, you can't go to Boston for us.

WILLY: Why can't I go?

HOWARD: I don't want you to represent us. I've been meaning to tell you for a long time now.

WILLY: Howard, are you firing me?

HOWARD: I think you need a good long rest, Willy (58 – 59).

STATUS

Modern tragedy depicts ordinary people in tragic situations. Modern writers have departed from the notion of the illustrious man implied by Aristotle. Modern playwrights, who live in a more or less democratic world where kings and queens are a thing of the past, have placed the idea of nobility in man – any man – as man. Today, the tragic hero must have a faith in himself as a human being. He must believe that his dream is the only correct one for him. His act stems from this belief. Willy Loman, for example is a salesman and refuses to be anything else. He wants to be viewed as a good, decent human being. He wants to believe that he is a well-liked person, who doesn't make mistakes. Willy refuses to change his view of the world and continues his struggle. Willy was a travelling salesman for Wagner Company for thirty-six years. He invested and dedicated all his youthful age to the company and actually believes he is indispensable to the company, especially in New England territory where he introduced the unknown trademark i.e. Wagner trademark. But now that he is old and exhausted, they took his salary away and eventually fire him. Linda, Willy's wife understands what Willy's problem is. This she points out in her conversation with her son:

LINDA: No, a lot of people think he's lost his balance. But you don't have to be very smart to know what his trouble is. The man is exhausted.

HAPPY: Sure!

LINDA: A small man can be just as exhausted as a great man. He works for a company thirty-six years. This man opens up unheard-of territories to their trademark, and now in his old age they take his salary away. (38)

Therefore, what is of the essence for modern writers is that man believes in his own mode of conduct, that he holds on to his dream until in the final denouement he is stripped of this dream and what he has accomplished is brought home to him in all its forces.

LANGUAGE

Language is a system of communication of thoughts and feelings. It is a body of words, and the systems for their use common to a people. The significance of language in human life cannot be overemphasized. Language is not only central to our social interactions and relationships, but also in distinguishing us.

The language of modern tragedy is prosaic instead of poetic. Modern dramatists who write about middle class characters could achieve verisimilitude by remaining close to everyday speech. Miller's *Death of a Salesman* is written in everyday language.

DEATH OF THE HERO

In modern tragedy, normally all the central characters die or are destroyed in the end. Death is not used as the extreme expression of human suffering. Rather, it is used symbolically to emphasize the disappointment and defeat that accompany it. Notice that Aristotle's definition does not include death of the tragic hero as a necessary component of tragedy. It is also important to note that death which is regarded as the most common of tragic ending is accepted by some cultures without agitation due to their belief in reincarnation. Therefore, to belong to the category of the tragic, "some value must be destroyed with regard to man, it does not have to be his existence or his life. But at least something of his must be destroyed- a plan, a desire, power, a possession, a faith". (Max Scheler 1010)

The play, *Death of a Salesman* ends with the death of Willy Loman, the central character. Willy commits suicide, convinced that the settlement on his life insurance policy will provide Biff with the wealth he needs to start a new life.

CONCLUSION

This paper attempted an exploration of the concept and characteristics of Classical, Shakespearean and Modern tragedies. Ancient Greek tragedy is modelled upon an essentially religious weltanschauung. Emphasis is laid upon the inscrutable power of fate or destiny and man's helplessness in his struggle against such uncontrollable divine power. In the Renaissance, the entire emphasis is laid upon the responsibility of the individual in bringing about his ruin. The Greeks had theo-centric vision while the Elizabethans laid stress on the vision of an anthropocentric universe. The modern period is totally different considering the mechanical and the social factors which control individuals. Modern implies more than that which is current. It suggests a disinterest in the past and in the values and forms of that past. The Greeks believe in the purity of genres and did not encourage mixed genre of tragedy and comedy. This was a defilement of the tragic spirit in their estimation. Consequently, comic relief was excluded from Greek tragedy, its place being taken by the satyr plays which were performed after the tragic trilogies. The two Sophoclean plays analysed are serious from the beginning to the end. Shakespeare had written in the Renaissance period during which writers like Giovanni made strong cases for tragic-comic genres. Some Elizabethan playwrights also advocated for and defended this mixed genres. Samuel Johnson in his "Preface to the Plays of William Shakespeare" opines that method of writing be "readily allowed. (...) That the mingled drama may convey all the instructions of tragedy and comedy cannot be denied because it includes both in its alternation of exhibition and approaches nearer than either to the appearance of life (...). (408)

In Shakespeare's plays, the comic relief follows a serious one as light relief. The clowns were clearly loved and enjoyed considerable license. In the Modern Period, rooms were created for comic relief. Though much of Miller's *Death of a Salesman* is dark, as it chronicles the disintegration of Willy's mind, it uses humour to relieve the heavy tension of tragic events. For instance, Willy and Charley fighting while playing cards relieve the audience's embarrassment for Willy showing he is losing his mind.

The conception of tragedy in the different ages reflected in the characteristics of their work; each age producing works that speak in the conventions and beliefs of that age. Hence while the crux of the tragic action lay with the divine power in Greek tragedies, the individual hero and his actions were of prime importance in Shakespearean tragedy. Modern tragedy depicts ordinary people in tragic situations. The hero is usually a victim of social forces, and is faced with difficult situations. The central idea of modern drama is common place. They flow out of the realities of life, everything therefore becomes the subject of tragedy and everybody is accepted as a worthy character of tragedy.

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