

# A Note on the Distinction between the Classical Tragedy and the Shakespearean Tragedy

Arpan Adhikary

(Assistant Professor in English, Government General Degree College at Kaliganj, Nadia, W.B.)

The art of tragedy writing in England reached its heights of excellence in the hands of the Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists, especially Shakespeare. The Shakespearean tragedy, however, is a hybrid genre, and its ancestry is neither singular, nor unitary. Being influenced to a great extent by the compositions of the eminent Roman tragedian Seneca, the tragedies written by Shakespeare exhibit marked distinctions from the classical Greek tragedies of Aeschylus, Euripides and Sophocles in both thematic and technical aspects.

Such Greek tragedies as Aeschylus's *Oresteia*, Euripides's *Medea*, and *Hippolytus*, and Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex* and *Antigone* are by and large based on a theocentric worldview, and the protagonists in these plays are portrayed as helpless victims suffering under the irreversible adversities of Fate. The particular 'hamartia's of Orestes, Hippolytus and Oedipus are described as caused by their respective 'hubris' or ignorance of the divine laws and forebodings. These classical tragic heroes are not morally responsible for their catastrophes, since they bring about their downfalls by committing certain fatal mistakes in absolute ignorance. Shakespearean tragedies, on the other hand, promote the anthropocentric outlook of the Renaissance individualism, and thus tend to minimize the scope of any divine influence on the protagonists' tragic downfalls. The 'hubris' of a Shakespearean tragic hero consists in his misapprehension of some crucial events and circumstances rather than ignorance of any oracle or predestination. Besides, such tragic heroes as Caesar, Othello, Hamlet, Lear and Macbeth are fully responsible for their respective errors that cause their catastrophes; in no case are these heroes mere helpless puppets in the hands of Destiny.

In certain technical aspects too the Shakespearean tragedies differ from the classical Greek ones. Firstly, Chorus was a very significant element in the Greek tragedies, and choric commentaries served to analyze the plots and characters. But Shakespearean tragedies completely abandon the Chorus, though in few cases Shakespeare kept provisions for some quasi-choric characters. Secondly, the Greek tragedies did not put much emphasis on the tragic conflict; but in the tragedies of Shakespeare the conflict has always been rendered a moot point in the tragic discourse. And thirdly, whereas the Greek tragedies observed the unities of time, place and action quite rigidly, the Shakespearean tragedies thoroughly flouted them.

Nevertheless, there are also certain affinities in between the classical and the Shakespearean tragedies. Both types comply with the basic tenets of the genre of tragedy; both the plays of the Greek masters and those by Shakespeare seek to dramatize the catastrophes of 'intermediate' kinds of protagonists; both sorts of tragedy choose the medium of poetry for the expression of the tragic discourse; and both adopt the five-act structure. On the ethical and moral grounds of tragedy also both the classical and the Shakespearean tragedies share a common accord.

---

## ➤ References:

- 1) *The Theory of Drama* by Allardyce Nicoll (Methuen, 1949), and
  - 2) *Tragedy (The Critical Idiom)* by Clifford Leech (Routledge, 2002).
- Students are advised to consult authentic books for better comprehension, and not to memorize this study material blindly.
  - Any kind of unfair use, adaptation or circulation of this study material is strictly prohibited.