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Features of Shakespearean Tragedies

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Tragedy

The word 'Tragedy' comes from Greek word 'tragodia' meaning 'goat song' related to sacrifice of goat made at the time of spring festival to worship the god 'Dionysus'. The word 'tragoidia' is made up of two words- 'tragos' meaning 'he goat' and 'oide' meaning 'a song'. Therefore, tragedy was a 'goat song' sung when 'he goat' was led to altar for sacrifice.

Tragedy comes from old French word 'tragedie' via Latin from Greek 'tragoidia'.

Tragedy is built up of two Greek roots- 'tragos' meaning 'goat' and 'oide', literary meaning 'goat song' that refers to dramatic plays of ancient Greeks named for actors dressed in skins of goat.

A Tragedy is a serious play or narrative in which a hero becomes engaged in a conflict, and experiences great sufferings and finally he is defeated and dies.

In Greek Drama, tragedy was the species dealt with the sad story of death, killing, and contained elevated language and action. Characters are involved in such circumstances that take them to an unhappy fate to arise the feelings of pity and terror.

A Tragedy involves disastrous events, calamity, misfortune, typically describing a conflict between the protagonist and superior force (destiny) having a sorrowful or disastrous ending that arises the feelings of pity and terror.

Shakespeare Tragedies involve serious actions lead to the downfall of main characters called tragic heroes. Disastrous, final output involves the death of hero and many others.

In 'Poetics', ancient Greek philosopher, **Aristotle** defined Tragedy as morally ambiguous (having more than possible ways) genre in which a noble hero goes from good fortune to bad.

According to **Aristotle**, a tragic hero can't be totally evil or purely good, but must be a character between the two extremes.

Aristotle defines Tragedy as, "an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of certain hero of noble stature whose fortune is reverse as a result of weakness in an otherwise noble nature.



Tragedy in England began in ‘*Elizabethan Age (16th century)*’ that involves the chief influences, dramatic tradition and theory- classical- The poetics of Aristotle and tragedies by Roman philosopher, **Seneca**.

In the late part of 16th century, the playwrights produced dramas varied widely in form and structure that include Shakespearean tragedies- ‘*King Lear (1608)*’, ‘*Hamlet (1603)*’ and ‘*Macbeth (1623)*’.

After 17th century, again tragedies in Classical or **Aristotelian** sense were written that involved serious work tragic in tone and intention.

Macbeth Hubris or his excessive *magnitude...through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation (catharsis) of these emotions.*” In Act 2, Macbeth murders king Duncan. He chooses bloody path to secure his throne.

Tragedies end towards more serious dramatic plots. In Act III Scene 2 Macbeth works as a villain. His ambitions overpower him and lead him for further terrible deeds. Macbeth decides to murder Banquo and Fleance. Macbeth says to lady Macbeth in utter unhappiness;

“We have scorched the snake, nor killed it.

...

But let the frame of things disjoint, both the worlds suffer” (Line 15-20)

Macbeth’s power and brutality is seen in Act 3. The Act is true climax point in which Macbeth murders Banquo and Fleance escapes.

The classical concept of Tragedy, as defined by Aristotle in his **Poetics** involves a pride becomes his dominant character. His over boldness and his personality invincibility push him for a tragic fall in Act IV Scene 1.

In Act V, Scene 8, Macbeth has a duel fight with Macduff. This is final confrontation and climax point. This Act is final moment of Hubris and his despair. He chooses to fight rather than surrender. He utters to Macduff;

“I will not yield,

To kiss the ground before young Malcolm’s feet,

And to be baited with the rabble’s curse”

The main Features of a Shakespearean Tragedies

The main features of a Shakespearean Tragedies are:

Tragedy must end in some tremendous catastrophe, the death of the principal character.

The catastrophe must not be the result of mere accident, but must be brought about by some essential traits in the character of the hero acting either directly or through its effect on other persons.



According to **Aristotle**, the spectacle rouses in us pity and fear and purges us of these emotions. Characters become isolated at last.

There is usually a central figure or tragic hero who is noble, but character flaw leads him towards his eventual downfall and death. Tragic hero has a high rank or status and shows strength facing destiny.

Combative Hero or Tragic Hero

Tragic Hero is a character in dramatic tragedy who has virtuous, sympathetic traits and heroic potentiality, but ultimately meets with suffering and defeat.

He struggles against his fate and thinks he is fated by the gods or by some supernatural forces to doom or destruction.

Aristotle analyses and describes the qualities of tragic Hero that is crucial part of tragedy.

A tragic character is noble in both birth and manner. He has central flaws that eventually becomes his dooming.

An ideal tragic hero should be good, but not too good or perfect because fall of perfect good man does not arouse pity.

Similarly, an utterly wicked person is also lacking in proper tragic qualities.

According to Aristotle, *“Perfect good as well as utterly wicked persons; are not suitable to be the heroes of the tragedies.”*

Drama requires a militant and combative hero. Othello is tragic hero because he fulfills key Aristotelian traits. He is a noble figure, but represents jealousy that leads to his downfall: killing his wife and himself. The play contains key elements of a tragic hero with qualities: Nobility, Hamartia, Peripeteia (Reversal), Anagnorisis (Recognition), and Catharsis. Othello’s dignified speech, his bravery, his heroic reputation and his status as a valiant general prove him a hero with nobility. Hamartia (Tragic flaw) in Othello lies his trust in villainous Iago. It is his fatal judgment he believes in Iago over Desdemona without any reason and evidence. Due to his Trust in Iago, he suffers from internal struggle. Following lines proves his trust in Iago:

“Honest Iago

My Desdemona must I leave to thee” (Act I, Scene 3, 297-298).

He declares:

“A man he is of honesty and trust” (Act I Scene 3, 284).

According to Aristotle, *“A tragic hero must be a person who occupies a position of lofty eminence in society. He must be well reputed and highly individual”.*

Shakespeare’s ‘Much Ado About Nothing’ is a Comedy in which Claudio functions as tragic hero due to his noble status and fatal flaw (Hamartia). He mistakes in his judgment. He blindly believes in Don John’s false accusations and thus fails to see deception. Claudio’s Hubris (Excessive Pride) lies in his quick acceptance of dishonor and his willingness to punish himself. Claudio’s key speech shows his credulity;



“Beauty is a witch

Against whose charms faith melteth into blood” (Act II, Scene 1)

Following lines show his boasts:

“The savage bull may, but if ever the sensible Benedick bear it, pluck off the bull’s horns and set them in my forehead” (Act I, Scene 1).

A Tragic Hero must be essentially admirable and good. Demise of the hero must come as a result of some personal error or decision. An authentic tragedy must always be product of some fatal choice or action. A tragic hero must bear some responsibility for his own doom. Soliloquies in Tragedies are important parts. Hamlet’s Soliloquies are crucial as they reveal his complex inner world. His indecision, struggles and grief. “In Hamlet, Soliloquy brings a compensating intimacy, and its use was an important part of Shakespeare’s stagecraft. Its recognized usefulness was for the disclosing of the plot, but he soon improved upon this. Soliloquy becomes the means by which he brings us not only to a knowledge of the more secret thoughts of his characters, but into the closest emotional touch with them too” (Preface to Shakespeare Hamlet, 16)

Aristotle uses specific Greek words for showing qualities of tragic Hero that have become terms in literature. These terms are:

1. Shakespeare’s Othello by Dr. B.B. Jain. Agra: Ratan Prakashan Mandir, 2000. Print.
2. Shakespeare’s Macbeth by Rajender Paul. New Delhi: Rama Brothers India Pvt. Ltd. 2016. Print.
3. Preface to Shakespeare Volume 1. Hamlet by Harley Granville- Barker. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers & Distributors (P) Ltd. Print.
4. Shakespeare’s Much Ado About Nothing by Raghukul Tilak. New Delhi: Rama Brothers India Pvt. Ltd. 2015. Print.