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Address

• Vikram Nagar, Boudhi Chouk, Latur.
• Tq. Latur, Dis. Latur 413512 (MS.)
• (+91) 9922455749, (+91) 8999250451

Email

• aiirjpramod@gmail.com
• aayushijournal@gmail.com

Website

• www.aiirjournal.com

CHIEF EDITOR – PRAMOD PRAKASHRAO TANDALE

Aristotle's Concept of Tragedy

Kamalakar Baburao Gaikwad

Assistant Professor in English
M.G.V's Arts and Commerce College, Yeola.

Abstract:

Tragedy is one of the significant concepts in the literary genre, drama. This term is used to invoke a powerful effect of cultural identity and historical continuity. It is an important site of cultural experimentation, negotiation, struggle and change. Tragedy usually focuses on figures of stature whose fall implicates others—a family, entire group or society. The tragedy causes an outcast and fugitive. In this tragic vision, happy ending is unrealized and something or someone dies or lapses into discontent.

In this research article, the researcher's attempt is to explore and investigate important aspects of tragedy. It would be helpful for the learners to know the definition of drama, origin, elements or species and Aristotle's concept of tragedy.

Key Words: Drama, origin, Aristotle's concept of tragedy, elements/species of tragedy,

What is Drama?

Drama is a long literary composition in prose or verse, developed through dialogues and action to be presented on the stage. While every other form of literature is complete in itself, drama remains incomplete without a stage. It is composite art. It is the play for theatre, T.V. or radio. It is the literature that walks and talks before us. It has dual utility and has acts. It is defined as piece of writing to be performed by actors.

Origin of Tragedy:

The term tragedy derives from classical Greek word 'tragaoidia' means goat song which comes from 'tragos' means he goat and 'aeidein' means to sing. It refers to an animal's (goat's) ritual sacrifice. It is associated with the god of the fields and vineyards, Dionysus. There is the celebration of the great Dionysis at Athens, the springtime festival of the death and resurrection of the god. From these contents Greek tragedy is developed.

Aristotle's Concept of Tragedy:

The term tragedy means an event causing great suffering, destruction and distress such as a serious accident, crime or a natural catastrophe. It is a play which deals with tragic events and having an unhappy ending, especially one concerning the downfall of the main character. It is a form of drama based on human suffering that evokes catharsis or pleasure in audiences.

Aristotle, a great philosopher of ancient Greece, elaborates the concept of tragedy in his famous work 'Poetics' (335 B.C). In this literary work, he projected the ideas about tragedy. He argued that tragedy developed from the improvisations of the leader of the choral dithyrambs i.e. hymns sung and danced in praise of Dionysos, the god of vine and fertility.(Poetics-IV) He intelligently substantiates the nature of reality. His interpretation of ideal form of tragic plays became a hint for western playwrights. A European playwright Shakespeare attempted to write plays that match with Aristotle's tragedy. In fact, Aristotle employed examples from the works of Greek playwright Sophocles. The Greeks believed that 'tragedy was the highest form of drama', and Aristotle's ideas about tragedy were based on this belief. Aristotle's defines tragedy,

“A tragedy is the imitation of an action that is serious, complete and of a certain magnitude in the form of action and not of narration, through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions.” (Poetics-VI)

Let's have a glance on the key terms of this definition:

‘The imitation of an action that is serious, having magnitude and complete in itself: This means that a good tragedy deals with ‘seriousness’. ‘Magnitude’ means great importance. Therefore most of the tragedies are about someone’s death. ‘Complete in itself’ means that the play must adhere to one issue; otherwise audience will be fail in understanding the plot.

‘in appropriate and pleasurable language’: Ancient Greek tragedy had a chorus whose role was to comment on the action of the play. The chorus sometimes sang their part. Aristotle said that the language should be easy to listen to. It should have appropriate rhythm and also good harmony for the lines that were sung.

‘in a dramatic rather than narrative form: In a play, the story must be dramatized or acted out.

‘with incidents arousing pity and fear: In a tragedy, the events or episodes in the play should lead the audience to feel very sorry for the main character--the tragic hero. The audience should also feel afraid for the hero as he moves toward a destructive end.

‘where with to accomplish a catharsis of these emotions: As the play moves along, the events should build up the emotions of pity and fear. A catharsis is a purging, or cleansing of thee emotions, a release of tension. In a tragedy, this is often a moment of revelation when the tragic hero “falls flat on his face,” and the audience can feel emotional outburst.

• **Aristotle’s Elements of Tragedy:** According to Aristotle, there are six species of tragedy.

1. Plot
2. Character
3. Thought
4. Diction
5. Melody
6. Spectacle.

1. Plot:

Plot means the action of the drama or play. It is the systematic arrangements of incidents and events. It has economy of events. It is the first demand of audience. In plot, stress is given on causality. Plot is the first principle and soul of the tragedy. Without plot, tragedy cannot exist. Essence of tragedy lies in plot. So without action, there cannot be tragedy but there may be tragedy without character. It helps to understand the relationship of characters. Plot and characters are complementary to each other. It occupies the highest place in the story of the novel. It can be grasped as a whole without much effort. It is the axis and content of the drama. Hudson rightly asserts, “Life is raw material for plot.” The dramatist is concerned with passions, conflicts and problems of human life. It is observed that all human happiness or misery takes place the form of action. E. M. Forster claims, “Plot includes both the story and theme.” Plot is a tragedy, the ground work through which the character derives its meaning and significance. There must be unity of plot. The plot may be simple, complex, loose, compact, tragic, comic, perfect, realistic, organic and well knit. The action must be complete. This completeness depends on following things.

1. Any events or episodes must be necessary to the main issue and must also be probable or believable.
2. A good plot has Peripety or Discovery, sometimes both.

Peripety or peripeteia is the change from one state of things at the beginning of the play to the exact opposite state by the end of the play. It is a sudden reversal of the hero's fortune from good to bad. This could be something like the change from being rich to being poor, or from being powerful to being powerless, or from being a ruler to being a beggar. The change that takes place in a tragedy should take the main character from a state of happiness to a state of misery. At this point, there should occur the anagnorisis-disclosure of the true circumstances or recognition of the hero's true self or nature.

Discovery is a change from ignorance to knowledge. This often happens to the tragic hero who starts out "clueless" and slowly learns how he himself created the mess he ends up in at the end of the play.

Catharsis means cleansing of the heart of the harder passions by arousing the feeling of fear and pity through the sufferings and death of tragic hero, leaving the spectator in calm of mind, all passion spent. Aristotle says that catharsis should be the goal of tragedy.

Catastrophe means final end of the tragedy. At this point, the hero/heroine or both meet their tragic death. The tragic end comes through hamartia and peripeteia. Usually in melodrama, sensational violence, cruelty, murders, bloodshed predominates.

1. Change by itself is not enough. The character involved in the change must have specific characteristics to arouse the tragic emotions of pity and fear.

Aristotle said that there are three forms of plot that should be avoided in a play:

1. A totally good man must not pass from happiness to misery. This will make the audience angry that bad things happened to him. They won't pity him as much as be angry for him.

2. A bad man must not pass from misery to happiness. This won't appeal to the audience at all because they won't want to see evil rewarded.

3. A bad man cannot pass from happiness to misery through some frailty or error called hamartia or tragic flaw. This tragic flaw becomes the cause of his fall, doom and death. For example- Oedipus kills his father because of his own rashness, marries his mother because of ignorance. It emphasizes on question of moral judgment. Though the hero's hamartia may be 'hubris'-the excessive pride and self confidence. It may be also a mistake in judgment. The audience won't feel sorry for him because they will believe he got what he deserved. The true tragic hero cannot be too good or too bad, but he must end up in misery. Aristotle concluded that the best tragedy centers on a basically good man who changes from happiness to misery because of some great error. For example, he might have a good quality, like pride, that gets out of hand.

4. The plot of a tragedy also involves some horrible or evil deed. The tragic hero, a person of stature, who is neither villainous nor virtuous, does it consciously, does it out of ignorance, or mediates it. For the audience to be horrified by the evil deed, the evil has to be done to someone important to the tragic hero. If the hero kills his enemy, the deed won't seem so bad. On the other hand, if the hero kills someone he doesn't care about, the audience won't care much either.

2. Character:

Character is the second most important element of tragedy. Character means people or a person around which the plot revolves. Character is moulded by the plot itself. It reflects action, speech, behaviour and men's qualities. The readers are not only interested in what happens but also to whom it happens. They are called as the vehicle to the story. Vitality and greatness of the play depends on characters. They must be good, appropriate, self, like, real and consistent. Story cannot take place without characters. Each character has an essential quality that is revealed in the plot. The moral purpose of each character must be clear to the audience. The characters are flat/static, dynamic/round etc.

a. Flat characters: These characters do not change in the course of the action. These are two dimensional characters. It is built around a single idea. It possesses a simple personality and a single trait which makes him a typical character. They remain the same throughout the drama.

b. Round Characters: The characters should possess four main qualities.

1. The character must be good enough irrespective of his status, hero or slave.
2. The characters should act appropriately for their gender and station in life.
3. The characters have to have believable personalities.
4. Each character must act consistently throughout the play.

3. Thought:

It is the power of saying whatever can be said and should be said at each moment of the plot. It creates a sense to think: 'Do the lines spoken by the actors make sense?' 'Are they saying what should be said at each particular moment in the play?'

4. Diction:

It is the dramatic technique of the writer. It is the powerful weapon by which author can attract the readers. Dramatist makes the drama effective and meaningful by use of words, phrases, kinds of languages, various expressions and suitability of ideas. It is the storehouse of words. It is the primary material of the dramatist. It is the choice and arrangement of words. It is both vocabulary and syntax. In diction, words are arranged in a metrical order. Thought and diction are involved with each other. Selection of words with magnificence has a great effect on the readers. Longinus says, "Beautiful words are the very and peculiar light of the mind."

Johnson in his works insists on simplicity, clarity and propriety of language. Thought deals with what is said, and diction deals with how it is said. There are many ways to say something. A good playwright composes lines that say something extremely well. In a good play, some lines are so well constructed that the audience can leave the play quoting the lines exactly.

5. Melody (Music):

The Greeks sometimes used musical accompaniment. Aristotle said the music has to blend in with the play appropriately.

6. Spectacle:

It refers to the staging of the play. It means a visually striking performance or display. It is something amazing, interesting or exciting to see that attracts attention. The spectacle should be appropriate to the theme of the play. It includes all aspects of the tragedy that contributes to its sensory effects, costumes, scenery, the gestures of the actors, the sound of the music and the resonance of the actor's voices.

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