

Conflict in Tragedy

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“All drama arises out of conflict”

Nicoll, *The Theory of Drama*

The basic element in determining the action of a play is the dramatic conflict which grows out of the interplay of opposing forces in a plot. The opposing forces may be ideas, interests or wills. While presenting the conflict there must also be a cause of opposition, or a goal within the dramatic action of the play. The real plot of tragedy begins with the opening of a conflict and ends with its resolution. The middle of the tragedy consists of the development and fluctuations of the conflict. The greatness of a tragedy depends on the manner the dramatist initiates, develops and concludes the conflict, the way how he handles it.

What is most accounted in a tragedy is the seriousness of action, the grimness of atmosphere, mental conflict, suspense, tension and the capacity to move the audience. Tragedy seeks to arouse the feelings of “pity and fear”. However, the feelings of “pity and fear” do not issue out of the spectacle of suffering to be undergone by the tragic hero. Rather it is conflict which breeds these sufferings, which arouses “pity and fear” in us. Mere suffering is not tragic, but only the suffering that comes out of conflict is tragic.

Tragedy presents mainly two kinds of conflict-outward and inward. Outward conflict comprises the struggle between two opposing groups or parties, in one of which the hero is the leading figure or between two minds-between two opposing passions or tendencies or ideas or principles which animate the different groups. *Macbeth* presents the struggle between Macbeth and the supporters of Duncan represented mainly by Macduff and Malcolm. In *Julius Caesar*, the cause of Brutus and Cassius collides with that of Caesar, Antony and Octavius. It is in fact a clash between two values: Republicanism with Caesarism. In this type of conflict, the great majority of the dramatist personae fall into antagonistic groups, and the hero is defeated and crushed at the end. Outward conflict may also lie between a person and a force beyond that person. This outer conflict is the most primitive of all types of tragic conflict and is mainly found in the Greek and modern tragedies. In Greek tragedies, the hero fights unequal battles with fate or destiny which drives them relentlessly on to their doom. In modern tragedies, the hero fights hopeless battles with the society-its age-old customs, conventions and rules. It is a conflict between the individual and his society.

Raphael sees the outward conflict as a conflict between “two forms of sublime a conflict between inevitable power, which we may call necessity, and the reaction to necessity of self-conscious effort” (D.D Raphael, 1980:25). He says that tragedy always presents a conflict and other form of drama is also built around a conflict. However, tragic conflict differs from others in that “the victory always goes to necessity” and “the hero is crushed”. The conflict which the hero

faces is with the inevitable power of necessity which is bound to defeat any opposition. Even though the tragic hero is crushed and defeated he emerges as a victorious character because “tragedy snatches a spiritual victory out of a natural defeat”. It is in his power and effort to resist that the greatness of the tragic hero lies. The greatness of spirit is the essential quality in him. Through his resistance and his effort, the tragic dramatist elevates man and hence tragedy achieves the elevation of a hero through triumph in a conflict. Both the spirit of the hero and the inevitable power are the “two forms of sublime” but “the sublimity of the hero is superior to the sublimity of the power which overwhelms him”.

Another type of conflict, and perhaps the more important than the outward, is the inner conflict—the conflict which goes on “within the mind of the hero, a conflict no longer of force with force, or even of mind with mind, but of emotion with emotion, of thought with thought” (Allardyce Nicoll, 1968:93). In its purest form, it is impossible to realize. It is a characteristic of the modern drama as contrasted with that of the ancient. But this type of conflict can be traced back to Aeschylus whose Orestes is presented as being at war with himself. In *Oresteia*, the spiritual substance is found divided against itself. The sacred bond of father and son demands that he should kill his mother Clytemnestra which the equally sacred bond of son and mother forbids. So, there begins an inner struggle within his own mind. During the Renaissance, Marlowe depicts the inner conflict in the character of Faustus, who fluctuates between the Renaissance aspiration for greater power of man and the orthodox Christian view which puts limitation to man’s presumptions and pride. His spiritual anguish is terrible and heartrending in which his soul becomes the battleground for the forces of good and evil. But it is Shakespeare who specializes in the presentation of the inner conflict which sharply distinguishes his tragic masterpieces from those of his contemporaries. In all his great tragedies, the hero is at war with himself; his soul is tossed up and down by conflicting emotions. He is face to face with a situation that arouses in his mind doubts, desires and scruples; these conflicting emotions tear asunder every fiber of his soul and he comes to stand helplessly sandwiched between “to be” and “not to be”. The mental agony and the world weariness which descend on his mind on the realization of his error are but an offshoot of his inner conflict. In *Hamlet*, Hamlet’s own mind is torn by the conflict between his desire for revenge and the moral scruples which withhold him from moving to his purpose. In *Macbeth*, it is the struggle between ambition and conscience in Macbeth’s mind which generates the inner and higher tragedy.

In the Greek tragedies, the conflict is described more profoundly in terms of external conflict. The tragic vision presented is man in conflict with other forces greater than himself. The other forces operating in these plays are described as Fate, Destiny, Chance and Necessity. Man is crushed in his conflict with them and hence external conflict is best seen. However, there are also seeds of internal conflict in the plays. Orestes, Medea and Oedipus, all of them suffer from a mental agony and it is from their struggle to resist that they emerge as tragic characters. If they make a compromise with the forces then they will remain only as pathetic characters who are acted upon. But it is their power to resist and their contemplative nature that gives them the tragic stature.

The Elizabethans, especially Shakespeare and a few others, employ both the inner and the outer conflict. However it is the inner conflict which gives significance to the plays of Shakespeare. With the help of soliloquies, Shakespeare is able to present the inner conflict in a more satisfactory way than other dramatists. Neo-classical drama combined the two forms of conflict. The neo-classicist presents the inner conflict in a highly circumscribed form. Modern tragedy also employs both forms of conflict.

During the nineteenth and twentieth century, different theories arise with the central idea of conflict being the mainspring of tragedy. Among them, the theory of Hegel and the Marxist view may be mentioned. According to Hegel, tragic conflict occurs when two ethical principles separate themselves from the substance and collide (R.P.Draper(ed), 1980:112-119). The conflict is a result of the collision of equally justified powers and individuals. Both the ethical values are “just” and “good” but they are only partial or narrow interpretations of good. They are one-sided, opposite and true to a point and hence carried out in a particular way. When this particular ethical value carries out its aims and objectives, it injures another and the other equally justified power reacts against the former. In this way, the tragic conflict occurs and both the powers destroy one another in their mutual conflict. However, the final note is one of harmony and “tragic reconciliation”. At the end of it, the collision is completed and brought about a “vision of an affirmative reconciliation and the validity of both the powers”. This final outcome is neither of a “blind fate” nor of an “irrational destiny” but a rational one.

Hegel prefers ancient to modern tragedy and regards *Antigone* as “the most magnificent and satisfying work of art of this kind”. According to him, modern tragedy is more personal and particular and hence lacks universality. His theory can be illustrated from the play *Oresteia*. In the play, Aeschylus made clear that older ideas of justice lead to unending internal conflict and thus he presents the conception of a divine justice that will result in unmixed good. The old gods are to be reconciled with the new. Both Appollo and the Furies represent two equally good ethical values, but they are at the same time opposite also. Hence, they come in conflict and destroy each other in their mutual conflict yielding to a new conception of divine justice. In *Agamemnon* and *Cheophori*, the tragic conflict is presented skillfully and in *Eumenides*, the conflict is resolved.

The Marxists see the conflict in tragedy in social and historical terms. Society itself and as such social development are seen as contradictory and conflicting in character. Their idea is that tragedy occurs at these points where the conflicting forces must take action and carry the conflict through to a transformation. Their theory also propounds an affirmative as well as a positive note. Raymond Williams (Raymond Williams, 1966:53-54), in his study of tragedy, clearly states the main idea behind their theory as:

Important tragedy seems to occur, neither in periods of real stability, nor in periods of open and decisive conflict. Its most common historical setting is the period the substantial breakdown and transformation of an important culture.

In his illustration of the theory, he sees Greek tragedy as “the concrete embodiment of the conflict between primitive social forces and a new social order”, the Renaissance tragedy as “the embodiment of the conflict between a dying feudalism and the new individualism”, modern tragedy as “conflict between ideas”. Thus, with the Marxist, there is complete exclusion of internal conflict giving more emphasis and prominence to the external conflict shown in terms of social contradictions and conflicts.

For a better understanding of the conflict in tragedy, we can illustrate it from William Shakespeare’s play *King Lear* in detail. In the play, Shakespeare deals with the tragic aspect of human life in its most universal form. As he is a supreme master in the handling of plots, he presents the dramatic action in a highly complex form. The play is marked by depths of meaning and significance. An outer and inner tragedy takes place. “the outer tragedy is laid down on lines of the utmost sensationalism, dealing with murder and torture and bloodshed, the inner tragedy is

quieter and more poignant, involving usually a struggle between emotion and traits of character, which have risen out of habit and custom”(Allardyce Nicoll, 1969:171). The outer conflict in the play is of two kinds. The first kind of conflict is between two groups of characters who are the embodiments of the virtues of good and evil. This is presented more apparently than the other conflicts in the play. King Lear, Gloucester, Cordelia, Edgar, Kent are the good characters who have “fellow feeling” and “sympathetic love” towards other people. On the contrary, the bad characters represented by Goneril, Regan and Edmund are devoid of “fellow feeling”. They are primarily concerned with their personal destiny. “They seek only to gratify their physical lust and their will-to-power. A slight personal inconvenience seems to them more important than the agony of their closest kinsmen, simply because the sense of sympathy and of human relatedness lies wholly outside their experience” (Frank Kermode(ed), 1969:138). The bondage that lies between human beings is based on “contracts” and they are truly the defenders of their own interests. As a result of their self interest they come in conflict with the “good” characters and finally destroy themselves. In their struggle to achieve their goal, it is not only the “bad” characters who meet their end but also the “good” characters.

The other type of external conflict found in the play is man in conflict with god. This conflict is not apparently seen in the play but presents in the mouths of the characters. The idea of malevolent and wanton god working in our life is expressed in the words of Gloucester:

*As flies to wanton boys are we to th' gods,
they kill us for their sport.*

This very line suggests a pessimistic note and a deterministic philosophy. Here, man is seen as a passive character but his role is questioned. Gloucester is of the opinion that the gods are unjust and cruel. They take delight in inflicting pains upon mortals. He finds the wicked prospering and the virtuous suffering. So, in his bitterness of heart he thinks that Gods are unjust and malicious and that they inflict suffering upon mortals in sheer sport. On the other hand, Edgar expresses the idea of Gods being just and kind. He says:

*The gods are just, and of our pleasant vices make instruments to
plague us.*

This suggests optimism and Edgar is of the opinion that the world is governed by strict moral laws and those who do evil will have to suffer. But, in the course of the conflict between good and evil, the virtuous also suffer. Lear suffers because he does not behave properly with his daughter Cordelia. He trusted in the flattery of Goneril and Regan and later on, they become the instrument of his suffering.

The inner conflict which is the mainspring of the tragedy of the play is presented within the mind of Lear. He is confronted with a serious dilemma in his mind and his tragedy arises out of this inner conflict. It is “petty pride marring against a tenderer sympathy”(Allardyce Nicoll, 1969:171). Lear’s fondness for flattery makes him blind and thus he commits an error in judging his daughters. He misbehaves with Cordelia, the one who loves him most and gives away his kingdom to Goneril and Regan. When Lear realizes that he has committed an error by depriving Cordelia of her share of wealth and kingdom, he becomes insane. But, it is through terrible pain and suffering that new insights are born and new vision is gained. Lear at the end of the play is a different man from what we find him in the beginning. The trials and tribulations have purified

him. He dies purified, ennobled and rendered wise by what he has endured. Thus, he gains tragic stature at the end of the play in his death.

From an aesthetic point of view, we can say that it is the conflict which provides the interest and suspense in tragedy. Without conflict it is not possible to produce a good tragedy. It is with the help of conflict that the dramatist is able to present the serious action, the grim atmosphere, suspense tension and mental agony. So, conflict, having the capacity to move and arrest the audience, also enables to excite the twin emotions of tragedy-the twin feelings of “pity and fear”.

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