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## Shakespeare's Tragic Vision

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It goes without saying that Shakespeare was, by no means and in no sense, a conscious philosopher. Like a philosopher he did not build a system of philosophy nor did he see things in abstract as philosophers generally do, reducing even the concrete to the abstract. Such procedure would negate the very identity of creative art of which Shakespeare is universally recognised to be the ultimate standard of excellence. The way of the artist is to conceive things in the concrete and grasp and present reality in moving, pulsating images. This is particularly true of a dramatic artist whose primary concern is with living beings perceived in their individual complexity and variety.

Yet there was never a great creative artist without an equally great thought and vision behind his art. The great creative artist may or may not articulate his world-view and philosophy of life to himself and to others but great art cannot come into existence in a vacuum. Shakespeare's immensely great and multi-dimensional creative output – history plays, comedies, tragedies, tragi-comedies, romances and poetry including the incomparable sonnets – implicates a view of life and a deep and complex vision. This is what imparts to his plays, written primarily to be performed, a unique literary depth and grandeur and makes them the finest specimens of literature par excellence.

Shakespeare's tragic vision forms an integral part of his broader outlook on life and universe and, like it, is extremely complex and profound. In its depth and complexity it far surpasses the simplistic, almost naive, view of tragedy current in the Middle Ages of which Chaucer gives a classic representation in his *Monk's Tale*:

Tragedie is to seyn a certain storie,

As olde bokes maken us memorie,

Of him that stood in great prosperitie

And is y-fallen out of heigh degree

Into miserie, and endeth wrecchedley. (Lerner, 1968: 285)

Evanthius sums up the Medieval view of tragedy in a more comprehensive manner. In a tragedy, says he:

“the characters are great, the dangers severe, the conclusion sad. Furthermore, in comedy things are upset at the beginning and peaceful at the close, in tragedy things take place in the reverse order. Tragedies express the view that life should be rejected, comedies that it should be embraced.”(Ibid: 300)

This matter of fact definition and ascription of rejection of life to tragedy would seem grotesque in contrast to Shakespeare's complex tragic vision. Nor, is his vision fatalistic like

the Greek one in which the Gods are all-powerful and men merely puppets of fate. Oedipus cannot escape the pre-planned scheme of destiny: escape turns out to be implementation of the predestined scheme. Having plucked out his eyes at the end of the tragedy, Oedipus reappears on the stage to proclaim:

Apollo, friends, Apollo

Has laid this agony upon me,

Not by his hands,

I did it. (Walting trans., 1947: 62)

The agonising irony arises out of the fact that action moves on two planes – the human (and the apparent) and the Divine (and the hidden); the Divine plane is the reality; the human plane an illusion. If you – knowingly or unknowingly – disturb the Divinely ordered scheme, you will suffer: the reaction set in motion thus will swallow you up as it did Oedipus. This view situates tragedy more in the universal order than in man though as the instrument through whom tragedy is enacted man too has his importance yet his hamartia is merely an error of judgement true to its literal meaning in the Greek – “the missing of the mark with bow and arrow”.

In Shakespeare’s vision, tragedy lies at once within man and outside of him. It seems to originate from man but takes place with the co-ordination of universal forces. Grandeur and depravity are inextricably and enigmatically interwoven in man:

What a piece of work is man! how noble in reason! how infinite in faculty.... in action how like an angel! in apprehension how like a god! (*Hamlet* II,ii ll 292-95)

And yet:

O, what may man within him hide,

Though angel on the outward side. (*Measure for Measure*, III, ii ll.253-54)

This hidden horror is not confined to Iagos and Edmunds only but manifest itself in a Macbeth and momentarily even in an Othello. Harold Bloom rightly calls these figures (Iago, Edmund, Macbeth) hero-villains.

The universal forces that seem to be mysteriously hand in glove with the inner human source of tragedy appear in the form of circumstances chances, omens, witches, ghosts and trifling yet significant events like the loss of a handkerchief.

What in Shakespeare’s vision is the rationale of tragedy in the scheme of things? His is a vision in which nothing is amiss. There is a divinity that shapes our ends. Even the fall of a sparrow represents a special providence. In the vision of horror, the scheme of the universe may seem callously indifferent and gods like wanton boys decimating men as if they were flies. In *Macbeth* and *Hamlet* such feelings are certainly stirred but that is not the conclusion. If we are eager to draw a conclusion it may be in Edgar’s words in *King Lear*; ‘the gods are just’ and therefore:

...Men must endure

Their going hence, even as their coming hither

Ripeness is all (*King Lear*, V, ii, ll 9-11)

John Keats, an ardent devotee of Shakespeare, was among the first who read and re-read *King Lear* from this point of view. The fruit of this keen and repeated study of the play is available to us in the form of a significant letter and his great sonnet, *On Sitting Down to Read King Lear Again*. The letter was written to his brother George Keats, who had migrated to America and attempts a justification of the presence of heart-break and suffering in the world to school men and covert their dross to gold. The letter says that it is the misguided men who call this world a vale of tears. In fact it is the vale of Soul-making. We are born with intelligences which are to be trained and schooled to be converted into souls. For this kind of training a world of suffering and misery and heartbreak is necessary. This is followed by the significant remark that if we could look upon the world with the eyes of God and with the eyes of the poet of *King Lear*, then nothing would seem amiss.

Where are the songs of spring? Ay, where are they?

Think not of them, thou hast thy music too.

The sonnet compares the experience of reading the play with passing through a cleansing fire from which one can rise and be re-born phoenix-like with new wings.

Where lies the catharsis of a tragedy like that of Shakespeare? Macbeth falls but falls in circumstances where he seems helpless and retains a certain measure of dignity even in depravity. Othello regains the nobility of his soul before taking his life. Hamlet keeps us tied to him as if he were each one of us. Indeed Coleridge and Goethe and countless other readers have had this feeling and continue to have it. Lear is reborn with a grandeur that far surpasses his kingly glamour. All of them renew our faith in man, our sense of pride in human dignity.

Shakespeare's tragic vision is at the same time his vision of love. Destroy love and you have chaos. Return to it, you have order. This is Shakespeare's everlasting message. Did he turn to his romances in the end in order to escape his tragic vision of horror and darkness seems to be a question beside the point as his vision at no stage was a vision of unmitigated horror and darkness. The final romances once again highlight the theme of the restoration of order through love.

This complex yet life-affirming vision imparts to Shakespearean tragedies a unique organic unity and resolves all dichotomies and contradictions into a marvellous integration. There is therefore no need to worry about whether it is the character or the action on which emphasis falls in Shakespearean tragedy. There are critics who believe that Shakespeare was more preoccupied with the delineation of character. Witness Bradley, and Ernest Jones's obsessive concern with Hamlet. Others stress his emphasis on action. The fact is that Shakespearean tragedies exhibit a beautiful pattern of integration in which everything falls into place. Character is action and action is character and every part is of a piece with the whole and all parts combine to produce the over-all signification of a play.

The vision and pattern of unity and integration is duly reflected in the language and style of Shakespearean tragedy. The philosopher Wittgenstein remarked that 'the limits of my language are the limits of my world'. It is not the quality of the vocabulary that a poet uses but the way he employs language in an organic pattern to make words yield their maximum possible meaning. Shakespeare's vocabulary is not awe-inspiring by its quantity, it is awe-inspiring by its economy and God's plenty that this economy enfolds. Shakespeare has just used 31534 words (excluding repetitions) in his total output, a number far less than used by

very minor and negligible writers. Lesser minds feel stupefied by Shakespeare's miraculous use of language. In 1793 one Mr Steevns changed Shakespeare's famous line from *Macbeth* 'Macbeth hath murdered sleep' to 'Macbeth hath murdered a sleeper', believing that he taught Shakespeare a lesson in precision. It is because Shakespeare's language and style is so indissolubly integrated with his vision that he is as great a poet as a dramatist and there is every justification in treating his plays as poems in their own right even as they are supreme as plays. His imagery is absolutely in consonance with the action, the characterisation and the general ambience of a play. The passionate Othello speaks in metaphors but the cold, calculating Iago uses abstract language. Sometimes the whole atmosphere of a play is conveyed by its language and imagery. Images of the birds and animals of prey and storms and hurricanes predominate *Lear* whereas *Hamlet* is replete with images of rotteness as well as the mixing up of imagery reflecting the mental confusion of the characters:

...to suffer

The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune

Or to take arms against a sea of troubles. (*Hamlet* III, i ll56-58)

In her own way, therefore, Caroline Spurgeon is justified in her venture of card-indexing and deducing generalisations from carefully categorised images as Wilson Knight is justified in treating Shakespearean tragedies as extended metaphors. Similarly Harlery Granville-Barker's theatrical approach is as much justified as Ernest Jones's preoccupation with Hamlet's Oedipal complexes. All these studies are justified as long as they are regarded as different yet integral colours of a pattern reflecting a complex vision.

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