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**SHAKESPEARE AND THE CLASSICAL TRADITION OF TRAGEDY**

Shakespeare lived between 1564 and 1616 and is rightly considered a great playwright of all time. He wrote many plays, many of which are described as tragedies. Shakespeare's work is best seen as building on the existing tradition -the classical tradition of tragedy -in the sense that, like other Elizabethan playwrights, he recognized the Greek tradition as one on which to draw, while at the same time injecting his own original ideas. Such originality accounts for the production of his plays. His main tragedies include Julius Caesar, Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth, Anthony and Cleopatra. Coriolanus and Timon of Athens. Even though Shakespeare was a dramatist and not a theorist like Aristotle, we should be interested in his contribution to the making of tragedy as a dramatic form. In this case too, it is proper to assess his work in relation to the standard set by the classical tradition of tragedy to see the extent to which he upheld the tradition and the remarkable departures in his work. We may just consider Shakespeare's work against each of the principles defined by Aristotle. What you will discover is that many of the principles are upheld and only a few are disregarded. A major feature of classical tragedy which also operates in Shakespeare's plays has to do with the social status of the tragic hero. The hero must be highly placed. This is sustained in Shakespeare's tragedies. His tragic heroes are kings, princes or war generals. Each of them is at least presented as a distinguished member of the society. Othello, who is the hero of a play of the same title is a respected general. There are also kings like Hamlet and Lear, while Macbeth is a nobleman. The element of hubris itself is evidenced in Shakespearian tragedies. For instance, we are made to see Othello as almost gullible. These facilitate his errors and eventual fall. The tragic hero in Shakespeare is generally not faultless. Most of the time, his own weakness is largely responsible for his fall. The language of Shakespearian tragedies is additionally elevated. This is apparent in the use that he makes of verse. In fact, the speeches of the tragic heroes are generally embellished and this has been a factor that endears his work to so many readers.

The observation of the prescriptions with regard to the status of the tragic heroes and the adoption of a befitting language for them in Shakespeare, coupled with the operation of the element of tragic flaw in them, should give you the impression that some other elements of classical tragedy will naturally become applicable with their fall the elements of reversal of fortune that the tragic figure experiences, and catharsis that the audience also partakes of, as the emotions of fear and pity are elicited by the tragic end of the characters. But you should not be hasty to conclude that Shakespeare upholds all the principles outlined in the Aristotelian Tradition. He uses theidea of the unities of place, action and time beyond the day his tragedies end in them. This factor shows that Shakespeare only complied with the Greek Tradition to the extent that it was relevant to his own intention; after all, traditions are made by man.

**MODERN TRAGEDY**

You may have noticed that the Aristotelian principles of tragedy have been very influential. The fact that it is possible to assess the work of Shakespeare using the principles is a clear testimony of this. While it is true that Shakespeare tries to depart from the tradition, he at least upholds some of its principles. We may, in fact, say that the classical tradition of tragedy has been the main standard from which all other traditions define their principles. Apart from the Greek tradition of tragedy which Aristotle tried to characterize, you should note that there is also a modern tradition of tragedy. Modern tragedy makes a clear departure from the classical convention. This development is associated with the work of dramatists like Henrik Ibsen and Arthur Miller. At the heart of the concern of modern tragedy is the desire to assert that not only the highly placed or the noble are fit as subject of tragedy. In other words, the ordinary man is equally fit as a subject of a tragedy. Aristotle had thought that only people of high birth could be tragic heroes. A play like Death of a Salesman by the American playwright is a good example of a modem tragedy. The tragic hero in the play is Willy Loman who is by no means a man of high birth. What is suggested in the play, as in all other plays operating within this tradition, is that anyone can be a tragic hero. In addition, all other requirements prescribed by Aristotle with regard to the form, duration, language and character of tragic hero are discountenanced.

The fact that the concept of tragedy itself has evolved over the ages is evidence that tragedy is responding to changes within the human societies. Drama responds to the changes in society and culture. For example, Sophocles’ Oedipus is available in the form of an ‘adaptation’ in different cultural environments and contexts. The product of this effort emerges as a departure from the original work in many respects.

Greece has had a lot of influence on the development of drama in Europe, America and Africa. A very good example is the evolution of tragedy as a dramatic form. We cannot deny the fact that all that we have is a situation in which a conscious effort is only being made to depart from the classical tradition.