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English Literature B

05 'Violence is at the heart of tragedy'

Whether or not violence lies at the heart of tragedy very much depends on how you interpret the word "violence". If taken in the sense of physical harm, then it is arguably incorrect to claim that this is a core element of the tragic genre given the existence of literature such as Richard II, where the story is driven through verbal confrontation and sparring as opposed to physical brutality. However, if we decide to treat "violence" as a more umbrella term containing within itself the ideas of physical, verbal and emotional harm, then the idea that violence lies at the heart of tragedy becomes much more defensible. The aforementioned play Richard II sees little tangible confrontation, but is littered with a sort of linguistic jousting as Richard himself attempts to overcome Bullingbrook through appeals to notions of divine right and inherent status. Other tragic works like F. Scott Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby see more violence in the literal sense, with the assault, abuse and eventual death of Myrtle Wilson occurring throughout the novel. Yet due to her status as a minor character one could argue that just because violence occurs it doesn't mean that it is at the heart of the tragedy. Indeed, on more than one occasion, violence has little impact on the story overall, with events being recounted by a character extremely unlikely to get into an altercation given their nature as a voyeur- Nick Carraway. However, there is still scope for debate as a result of violent events like the death of Myrtle Wilson arguably destroying Gatsby's dream, depending on perspective.

In Richard II, the conflict between characters primarily manifests itself in the form of verbal conversation. In Act 1 Scene 1, the play begins with such a 'fight', as Bullingbrook and Mowbray viciously argue with one another over the death of the Duke of Gloucester. Indeed, this scene arguably does more to establish the nature of the characters present than the physical fight that almost happens directly afterwards. Bullingbrook's apparent great dismay establishes him as a character concerned with justice and proper adherence to the law, while his use of language hints at potential political skill and perhaps even lofty aspirations, although that is something of a stretch. His allusion to "sacrificing Abel" in reference to the dead Duke draws a biblical parallel between current events and the tale of Cain and Abel, thereby subtly implicating Richard, a relative of Gloucester. In doing so, Bullingbrook sets himself up as an opposite number to Richard, serving as the tragic protagonist or antagonist based on personal opinion. This verbal altercation is therefore extremely important in setting up certain elements of the play, while being totally devoid of violence. Indeed, it is in fact the absence of violence that truly drives the story onward, with Richard's premature halting of the duel between Bullingbrook and Mowbray prior to banishing them often being seen as his hamartia by critics. The idea of events being driven by verbal confrontation as opposed to physical violence is something that can be seen throughout the play, with crucial events like Richard stealing Bullingbrook's inheritance and "resigning" the crown being totally devoid of violence. While violent events do occur, such as the war in Ireland, they take place in the background, and are not the focus of Shakespeare's attention, lending more credence to the view

A01 - descriptive + detailed engagement with a.

A03 - context of text integrated into argument

proceed A detailed and focused intro A0.

A01 - excellent understanding of the play

A02 - good focus on stagecraft

A01 - has a focus

A01 - fluent expression

A02 - excellent explanation of Shakespeare's narrative methods

A01 - sharp focused topic sentence

A01 - need to explain with reference to evidence

that physical violence does not lie at the heart of Richard II. While Richard's death at the end of the play does reveal Bullingbrook's conflicting attitude to power ("though I do hate the murder I love him murdered"), at this point the story has essentially run its course, with key plot points already occurring. It is therefore not unjustified to say that physical violence lies at the heart of Richard II, although a case for verbal confrontation could plausibly be made despite this not being how the term "violence" is traditionally taken. *An evaluative argument that is fully coherent (A01/A05)*

explain more fully how the quote illustrates this conflict

The Great Gatsby sees more violence than Richard II, yet one could argue whether or not this means that physical altercation is what lies at the heart of the story. As hinted at previously, events like the beating of Myrtle Wilson's nose by Tom Buchanan are, while disgusting, not overly impactful on the course of the story. Indeed, this "short sharp" burst of brutality in no way advances the key plot line of Gatsby and Daisy's relationship, and does alarmingly little to affect the relationship between Myrtle and Tom, which remains crucial to Carraway's narrative. In short, life goes on. What is truly at the heart of The Great Gatsby, and thus what makes the tale tragic, is arguably the idea of Gatsby's impossible dream, and perhaps even the American dream which Fitzgerald makes of point of painting as grim and unachievable. Gatsby's persistent (and ultimately hopeless) desire to "repeat the past" and "fix things" just as they were is what keeps the story 'ticking along' (much like the clock used in chapter 5 to hint at the impossibility of Gatsby controlling time, as it slips through his fingers much like Daisy did). In some ways this could be taken as symbolic of how Gatsby objectifies Daisy, treating her as an "enchanted object" to be acquired as opposed to a real human being. Indeed, Gatsby's continued requests for her to tell Tom she never loved him certainly hint at a lack of empathy or understanding. It is this dream of Gatsby's that lead him to throw the parties, to reconnect with Daisy, to attempt to make her love him and disregard Tom and Pammy, to place his faith in the "fairy's wing" that the rock of his world rests on. While one cannot ignore the violence at the end of the novel which firmly puts an end to Gatsby's dream, one could easily argue it died a long, long time ago. Gatsby's proclamation of "Can't repeat the past? Why of course you can" hints at a failure to understand the impossibility of his aspirations, which is what ultimately makes the story tragic, as opposed to the violence. While the death of Myrtle is upsetting, the violence experienced by her is not as central to the story as Gatsby himself, who is presented in such a way by Nick Carraway that we continuously focus on his "heightened sensitivity to the promises of life" as opposed to the suffering of characters like Myrtle and the workers of the Valley of Ashes, with this idolization of the de facto aristocracy perhaps something Fitzgerald wanted us to think about.

Doesn't it foreground Myrtle's death?

A02 - Excellent use of quotation

Explain this idea more clearly

To conclude, physical violence is, though present, not central to Richard II or The Great Gatsby. The tragedy of Richard is not the little violence experienced or even his death, but really his realisation of his failures in Act 5 when it is too late, and his failure to use his evident intelligence to help the people of his kingdom. What lies at the heart of his tale, is the tragedy of human greatness gone to waste, corrupted to flattery and weakness. Gatsby's story is tragic because of his impossible dream. [Ran out of time, conclusion would've been longer]

Explain via % textual support. You could engage in more detailed language analysis.

Need more on Gatsby

debat?

A05 - valid counter-argument