

TRAGEDY AS A FORM

Objectives:

1. To learn the history of Tragedy
2. To understand the definition and constituents of Tragedy
3. To know the different types of Tragedy

Introduction: In the previous unit you have been introduced to the concept of drama, its definition and its elements. You know that drama probably gets most of its effectiveness from its ability to give order and clarity to human experience. The basic elements of drama- feelings, desires, conflicts and reconciliations- are the major ingredients of human experience. The playwright can organize these experiences into understandable patterns, in a meaningful manner. The unimportant is omitted and the significant is emphasized.

Tragedy is an important form of western drama. It creates a mood that emphasizes the serious intention. There may or may not be some moments of comic relief. In a tragedy, the hero, an exceptional yet flawed individual faces disaster and usually death. This presentation raises questions about the meaning of existence, the nature of fate, morality and social or psychological relationship.

Origin of Tragedy

There are references of Greek dramas performed as early as seventh century B.C. The dramas were in the form of choral performances, which included dancing and singing at the festivals of Dionysus, the Greek God of wine and fertility. Drama contests were organized from 534 B.C. The first such contest for tragedy was won by Thespis. The most important period of ancient Greek drama was the fifth century B.C. Tragedies were performed in festivals which lasted for several days as part of the annual religious and civic celebrations. The best tragedies got prizes in various forms including goats. The word tragedy is derived from the Greek word 'tragoidia' which means 'goat song' (tragos = goat, aeidein = song). Tragedy was usually solemn, poetic and philosophic. Of the hundreds of tragedies written, only about 35 have survived. These tragedies were based on myths. Usually the main character was admirable, but not perfect and was confronted with a difficult moral choice. The character struggled against hostile forces but faced defeat and the tragedy usually ended

with his death. The tragedies were performed in the form of episodes separated by choral odes wherein the chorus danced to music in leftward, rightward and central movements. The actors wore masks to indicate the nature of the character. Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides were eminent Greek tragedians. Usually these playwrights wrote trilogies, a group of three plays. *Oresteia* of Aeschylus, *Oedipus Rex* of Sophocles and *Medea* of Euripides are three important Greek tragedies. From the third century B.C. Greek drama declined. Tragedy was introduced in Rome by Livius Andronicus in 240 B.C. But today only the tragedies of Lucius Annaeus Seneca survive. In Rome, tragedy was less popular than comedy. Seneca's plays were very influential in the Renaissance period. Later western dramatists borrowed a number of techniques from Seneca like division into five acts, elaborate, flowery language, the theme of revenge, magic, ghosts etc.

Drama in England is an independent development according to Nicoll. But it passed through similar stages as did the Greek drama. It has its origin in the liturgical services. Initially, dramas were in the form of Mysteries and Miracle plays. Later on came the Morality plays. These were followed by the Interludes. Finally, the drama proper emerged in England in the sixteenth century. The first English tragedy was *Gorboduc* (1562) written by Thomas Norton and Thomas Sackville. Drama flourished in England from 1580 to 1642. Elizabethan drama spans from 1580 to 1603 and Jacobean drama from 1603 to 1625 and Caroline drama from 1625 to 1649. William Shakespeare (1564-1616), one of the greatest English dramatists belonged to the Elizabethan- Jacobean period. Thomas Kyd and Christopher Marlowe paved the way for Shakespeare, Webster etc.

Aristotle wrote the *Poetics* in fourth century B.C. which is the earliest and the most influential essay on drama. The essay was a result of close study of the Greek plays of his time. He has discussed the nature and function of tragedy in particular and poetry in general in this essay.

Tragedy: Definition and Constituents

Tragedy: Definition

Let us now see the definition of tragedy as given by Aristotle.

“Tragedy is the imitation of an action, that is serious, complete and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several

kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting a proper catharsis of these emotions”.

The above definition sums up two main aspects- the nature of tragedy and the function of tragedy. The definition tells us that tragedy, like any other form of art is an imitation. But it is an imitation of an action which is of a serious nature and has a certain magnitude and is complete (i.e. has a definite beginning, middle and an end). The language is artistic and consists of many ornaments which are found in the various parts of the tragedy. The most important feature of tragedy is that it is performed, enacted before the audience and not narrated by someone. The actions in a tragedy are meant to arouse the twin emotions of pity and fear in the minds of the audience and thereafter bring about their catharsis which means purgation or cleansing. The aim of tragic representation on the stage is to leave an audience relieved and not depressed and give what is termed as “tragic pleasure” by bringing about a catharsis of pity and fear. Aristotle tells that certain emotions like pity and fear do not get used enough in civilized life. So tragedy attempts to evoke these emotions and let them flow in order to establish calm of mind. This is the guiding principle in the choice of the tragic hero.

The Constituents of Tragedy:

The constituents or elements of tragedy include plot, character, thought, diction, spectacle and song. In modern times stage directions and setting are also included as elements of a tragedy. These elements are also common to the novel but there is some difference in the way these elements are seen in the two. While the novel is in the narrative form, tragedy is in the form of action. The novel usually does not have any limit of length. A tragedy or any drama for that matter has to deliver its message in the span of a few hours. Aristotle speaks of the “Three Unities” to be followed in a tragedy. First is the “Unity of Time” whereby a tragedy should incorporate a complete action as will be presented in “one revolution of the Sun or slightly more” i.e. the events presented should not require more than a day to occur. This naturally introduced the “Unity of Place” whereby the actions occurred in more or less a single place. This was inevitable, taking into consideration the means of transportation existing in those days. The “Unity of Action” is by far the most important of all the Unities. It refers to the presentation of a single, complete action which becomes easy for the human mind to grasp. All these result in a great economy in the handling of plot and delineation of character in a tragedy. The novelist does not depend on anyone else for the final effect of his

work, but a dramatist has to depend on the actor, stage manager and many others for the effect. The dramatist does not directly address his audience like a novelist but can only do so through the medium of the character that becomes his mouthpiece.

i) Plot: A plot is the organization of event and incidents, episodes and situations into a coherent, convincing structure and it is rendered towards the achieving of particular emotional and artistic effects i.e. a plot takes into account the nature of characters, the way in which the events are related to one another, and their dramatic effect. In fact, plot is more than a sequence of events. The insignificant is omitted and the significant is retained and forcefully conveyed to us by the use of realistic dialogue and action on the stage

Gustav Freytag in his book *Technique of the Drama* (1863) has given the basic structure of drama. It has a pyramidal shape. Like all plays, tragedy also partakes of the above structure. All plays set forth a problem or a conflict. In tragedy the theme is dark or serious. It requires an exposition to explain the circumstances or situation from which the action is to take course; a complication (or Rising Action) during which it progresses or grows more involved; a climax (or Crisis) when it takes a turn for the worse; a denouement (or Falling Action) which unravels the complication and catastrophe that decides the fate of its character. In a five-act tragedy the exposition occupies the first Act or so. The second Act and a part of the third show the rising action, the climax a part of the third Act, the denouement the rest of the third, the fourth and a part of the fifth Act; and the final catastrophe, the rest of the fifth Act. In shorter tragedies each phase is proportionately reduced. According to Aristotle plot is the soul of a tragedy. There are two types of plot- simple and complex. In a simple plot the action proceeds as a continuous whole and the change in fortune of the protagonist takes place without peripetia (reversal of situation) or Anagnorisis (recognition or discovery). But a complex plot is one in which the change is accompanied by reversal of situation or recognition or both. The reversal of situation and recognition are based on surprise. However, plots based on scenes of suffering, violence, torture are rated very low by Aristotle as they indicate deficiency in the art of the poet. Aristotle does not favour the use of sub plots either. Usually whenever sub plots are used they are intended to illuminate the main plot. Aristotle believed sub plots to be proper only in comedy. But Shakespeare uses sub plots effectively in his tragedies also. Sometimes comic sub plots used in tragedies suggest an alternative way of looking at the predicament.

2. Characters: The agents that carry forward the plot are called characters. Characterization is an important constituent of a play after the plot. Aristotle calls it “ethos”, a set of moral qualities. We assess characters on the basis of what they say and do, and what other characters say about them. We understand them in the real sense when we relate them to the broader theme of the play. Aristotle’s concept and the modern concept of the character are two different things. Aristotle, who belonged to the classical tradition regarded community and not the individual as the centre. But today, a character is seen not only as a distinct personality but as a man with psychological depth, motivation, attitudes and a general emotional disposition. The main character is called protagonist or hero. In Shakespeare, we sometimes have an anti-hero in addition or a hero and a heroine. In Greek tragedy, the tragic hero was a person of high social position like a king, a prince etc. He was a good man but not perfectly good. During the course of the tragedy he passes from prosperity to adversity because of some “hamartia” (a miscalculation or an error in judgment). He commits series of such errors which is with the best intention though. It is also called tragic flaw. The unjustified downfall of such a tragic hero alone arouses the feelings of pity and fear. Thus, an exceptionally good infallible person or an utter villain cannot be a tragic hero according to Aristotle. However, Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, in spite of being a villain wins our sympathy.

3. Diction: It means the expression of the meaning in words. It is the exchange of words between the characters in a tragedy. Commonly known as dialogue, it carries the action forward in the form of verse or prose and holds a mirror up to what the dramatist attempts to express. It unfolds the relations between characters. Soliloquies and asides also form an important part of dramatic speech and help in understanding of the characters.

4. Setting: It is the general locale and the historical time in which the action occurs. The setting of an episode or scene within a work is the particular physical location in which it takes place. e.g. The general setting in *Macbeth* is medieval Scotland and the setting of Macbeth’s encounter with the witches is a blasted heath. The physical setting is an important element which generates the atmosphere of a work. When applied to theatrical production, setting also means the properties or the movable pieces of furniture on the stage. Sometimes it even includes the positioning of the actors in a particular scene.

5. Stage directions: They are guidelines, suggestions given by the dramatist usually to the producer, in the script of the play. In earlier drama, they were simple and few in number. They establish a link between the reader and the dramatist. Usually this function was

performed by the Chorus in the Greek drama. In modern plays the stage directions are many, complex and given in detail. They help the dramatist to create the exact atmosphere.

6. Conflict: It means some kind of struggle or competition. Without a conflict, there cannot be a drama. Conflict is of two types- external and internal. It could be between two persons, thoughts or ideas. It could be physical, psychological or Intellectual. Hegel in his discussion on tragedy points out that the most decisive conflict that lends grandeur to the human life is articulated when an individual has to choose between two versions of right action, the most painful and trying experience for him. Drama represents conflict in all its diversity and from a variety of perspectives. Shakespeare seems to prefer internal conflict to external one, though there are many scenes of external conflict in his tragedies. In modern absurd drama, the conflict centres round the philosophical belief that life is meaningful and the experience that such meaning does not really exist.

7. Chorus: It was an important constituent of the Greek drama and consisted of fifty persons. It has an interpretative function and is in fact a commentator. In a Greek tragedy, this body of persons formed, as it were, a multiple individuality, moving, dancing, and singing together and continually interrupting the dialogue and the progress of the action with its odes and interludes. "To combine, to harmonize, to deepen for the spectator the feelings excited in him by the sight of what was passing on the stage"- this was one of the grand effects produced by the chorus in Greek tragedy. It also served the purpose of a narrator or a commentator. The actions that happen off-stage, especially, acts of violence, war etc. are narrated by the chorus.

8. Thought: It is the faculty of saying what is possible and pertinent in given circumstances.

9. Song: It held the chief position among embellishments in Greek tragedy.

10. Spectacle: It has an emotional attraction of its own, but, of all parts, it is the least artistic. The spectacular effects do not depend on the art of the poet but on the stage mechanism.

Types of tragedy:

1. Classical or Greek tragedy: Aristotle's Poetics is based on the analysis of the Greek tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides. Hence, the characteristics of Greek tragedy are well stated in the Poetics. The stories in these tragedies being based on myths were

known to the audience. Hence, there was little element of surprise in them. As part of the religious festivals, there was a strong religious and moral element in the plays. Fate (nemesis) was supreme. The Greek tragedy, as far as possible, avoided scenes of brutal violence on the stage, though the subjects were often shocking and terrible. There were as few as five to six characters in the play. Such incidents were narrated by the chorus which was fifty men strong. The characters, usually the protagonist belonged to a high social order; a man with exceptional character but with a flaw which led to his downfall. Women and slaves were not considered fit subjects for a tragedy. The tragedies were 'pure tragedies' and there was no mixing of the comic with the tragic, thus following the Unity of Action. Greek tragedies were performed as trilogies; a series of three plays. But after serious plays usually there would be a 'Satyr play' which was separate from the tragedy and often crudely comic in nature.

2. Renaissance/ Elizabethan Tragedy: Renaissance or revival of art came to England in the middle of the sixteenth century which is slightly late than in other European countries. Due to Renaissance, there was an increase in classical translations which along with the English medieval tradition of Mysteries and Morality plays fired the imagination of English dramatists. The influence of the Roman dramatist Seneca is most important in the field of tragedy. The Senecan techniques like division into five acts, elaborate, flowery language, the theme of revenge, magic, ghosts etc. were freely borrowed by the Renaissance dramatists. Thomas Kyd and Christopher Marlowe among the University Wits paved the way for Shakespeare, Webster, Tourneur and others in the field of tragedy. Unlike the Greeks, the Renaissance dramatists did show violent scenes on the stage. Shakespeare is the most prominent dramatist of this period. Though Shakespeare conformed to the substance of the Greek tragedy, he did make changes in the form and characterization. The tragic hero has a driving passion or obsession which becomes his tragic flaw in the peculiar circumstances. Instead of destiny having the upper hand, Character is destined in Shakespeare though there is some role for destiny in the form of co-incidences, chance in his ultimate fall. Whereas external conflict and horror became popular due to Senecan influence, the conflict in Shakespeare was much internalized. Webster included both, internal as well as external conflict in his plays. Tragedies of the period were written in blank verse and on persons of eminence, historical figures etc. Ghosts, witches, murders were frequently used in the horror tragedies of Thomas Kyd (*Hieronemo, The Spanish Tragedy*) and Webster (*The Duchess of Malfi, The White Devil*) under Senecan influence.

3. The Restoration Tragedy/ The Heroic Play: The Heroic play is a peculiar product of the Restoration period (1660-1700). It was often criticized as unnatural, artificial and alien. It came into existence in response to the spiritual needs of a tired, disillusioned and decadent aristocracy. It created a dream-world with love, virtue and greatness in contrast to the debased life in reality of the times. It dealt with the themes of love and honour or duty. It is an artificial world which can be best termed as 'heroic' for the protagonist and his belief in his absolute power over his actions and surroundings. The Heroic play shows more affinity with the epic with its character, with its style, especially the use of heroic metre. The plot, the characters, the wit, the passions, the descriptions are all exalted and epical in style. Love and valour are the themes of a heroic play. The audience is amazed by the superhuman devotion and loyalty shown by the hero. To this love is linked the theme of honour, which includes all spiritual and moral qualities and the hero strives to possess them to be worthy of his beloved. The Heroic play shows complications such as two men loving the same woman, or two brothers or two friends. These lead to sudden turns in the fortune of the hero. The Heroic play usually ended on a happy note as the aim of the dramatist was to present the hero as a model to be emulated. Hence, he was rewarded in the end. Thus, there is poetic justice in the tragedy unlike the Greek or Shakespearean tragedy. Another version of such a play is the blank verse tragedy which uses the blank verse instead of the heroic couplet as the metre. John Dryden wrote such Heroic plays His *All for Love* based on Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* is a famous Heroic play.

4. Domestic Tragedy: This type of tragedy existed in the eighteenth century. It deals with the domestic day to day life of average middle class citizens and shows that family life and happiness are destroyed if the husband or the wife strays from the path of virtue. This type of tragedy flourished due to the rise in sentimentalism. There is a conscious attempt to make it ordinary, commonplace by doing away with the rhetorical style of the Heroic play. Fate had an important role in this type of tragedy as the authors felt that such situations gave a chance for the display of sentiments. George Lillo was the most important writer of domestic tragedy. His *The London Merchant* or *The History of George Barnwell* (1733) is the best example of a domestic tragedy. The play is full of artificiality and is in prose. The domestic tragedy paved the way for the modern theatre.