

University of Anbar / College of Arts / Department of English

Instructor: Omar SaadoonAyyed

Subject: Introduction to Literature / First class

TYPES OF DRAMA

1. TRAGEDY

Scholars seem to have agreed that the roots of tragedy must be traced to the Greece of the fifth century BC. Aristotle's theory of tragedy was formulated in the fourth century BC. Many people believed that Aristotle simply prescribed rules with which tragedy should be judged. On the contrary, his outlook seems to have been shaped by his familiarity with classical tragedies that had been performed. His theory may then be seen as an attempt to describe what he had carefully observed. Even though tragedy, as a dramatic form, is generally believed to have originated from Greece, it has evolved over the ages, incorporating changes and modifications of principle and practice in modern times.

Classical Tragedy: The Aristotelian Tradition

Aristotle's *Poetics* remains a good guide to the Greek tradition of tragedy which is commonly referred to as classical drama. As earlier stated, his ideas must have been shaped by his exposure to tragedies that were staged in his own days. It is however apparent that his outlook on tragedy was largely shaped by Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, which also serves as his favourite example.

Aristotle defined tragedy as:

A representation of an action that is worth serious attention, complete in itself, and some amplified; in a language enriched by a variety of artistic devices appropriate to the several parts of the play; presented in the form of action, not narration; by means of pity and fear bringing about the purgation of emotion? (cited in English: 473).

It is necessary to analyse the elements of Aristotelian theory of tragedy as noted as in the quotation, for a proper understanding. They help us to understand the classical principles of tragedy.

(a) The Tragedy Hero or Tragic Hero

The hero in classical tragedy was expected to be a man of noble birth. The nobility of the character is essential to make his fall tragic. This simply implies that the fall of an ordinary man was not considered remarkable enough to provoke dramatic interest. This explains why tragic heroes in most of these plays are either kings or other highly placed persons.

(b) Elevated Language

The language of tragedy, in the classical tradition, was also expected to be elevated. The ideal language for this form of drama was therefore seen as verse. It is reasonable to conclude that only elevated language would be suitable for the class of people that were the object of tragedy. Language was certainly seen as a reflection of the status of character and the seriousness of the subject of tragic plays.

(c) The Three Unities

Time, place, action: The Aristotelian principles also recognised the need to ensure that the action of the play is shaped by what have come to be known as the three unities. One of the principles is that the action of the play should not extend beyond a day. The unity of place has to do with the concentration of the action to a locale. The unity of action implies that only one action should be seen on the stage at any time. In addition, there should be only one plot. This equally extends to the purity of genre, implying that there should not be any digression. The plot must be so tight that it will not make any room for a comic relief.

(d) Hubris - The Hero's Tragedy Flaw or Tragic Flaw

One other feature of classical tragedy, as clarified by Aristotle, has to do with the weakness of the tragic hero. The tragic hero was expected to have a weakness in his character which will make his fall possible.

(e) Catharsis - Purgation of Emotion

The last element of classical tragedy has nothing to do with the play or the hero. It is directly related to the effect of the fall on the audience. The fall of the tragic hero is expected to elicit the purgation of emotion (what Aristotle called catharsis) due to the relief that the hero will cause.

2- COMEDY AND TRAGICOMEDY

The Nature of Comedy

Comedy comes from the Greek word *Komos* which means "a revel" and its origin is traced to activities surrounding ritual performances in honour of the Greek god of fertility and wine called Dionysus. Comedy is a form of drama often considered as the exact opposite of tragedy. It is remarkable that the popular emblem of drama, a pair of masks, appears to confirm this relationship between comedy and tragedy. While the sorrowful one is representing tragedy, the one smiling designates comedy.

Apparently, comedy is generally characterized by an element of the comic. But while a whole play may be described as comic, an aspect of a play may just constitute the comic element. This means that you may find the comic element in a play, even when it is not a comedy.

Another principle which is used in judging whether a play is a comedy or not is whether it ends on a happy note. A tragedy is often seen as ending on a sad note, often with the death of the hero.

A third principle that we may apply to identify a comedy also emphasizes its differences from the tragedy. It suggests that a tragedy appeals to our emotion while a comedy appeals to our reason. In other words, comedy makes us think due to the issues it raises.

Origin of Comedy

Comedy, just like Tragedy, is believed to have originated in Greece. Aristotle saw it as inferior and thus detracts from the importance of its subject. Aristophanes (448-385 BC) is believed to have contributed a lot to the making of the form. He made comedy a medium for the correction of social ills. Interestingly, the leaders of Athens were not spared. If satire was the main concern of Aristophanes' comedy, Menander, was identified with a different tradition of comedy, one that focused primarily on love. There have also been significant contributions to the development of comedy in various places, including Italy, France and England. Moliere promoted a tradition of comedy in France in the seventeenth century. Shakespeare has also written a number of comedies which, expectedly, have defined an identity for his comedy.

Shakespeare's comedies draw extensively on various sources and are often set in outlandish places. Most of his comedies are concerned with love; music is employed to enliven the unique world that they represent. One of the best known of his comedies is *The Merchant of Venice*.

Forms of Comedy

Comedy is broadly divided into two forms: high comedy and low Comedy. High comedy is that type of comedy that elicits a form of laughter that is thoughtful. It is friendly while trying to correct man. Examples of high comedy are comedy of festivities, comedy of manners and situational comedy.

Low comedy, on the other hand, is unsparing in ridiculing man. This is also reflected in the form of laughter it provokes. Examples of low comedy are Comedy of Marionette, slapstick comedy and farce.

Tragicomedy

We have examined two main forms of drama - tragedy and comedy. You will be right if you wonder whether there is a form that stands in between the two. The form in this case blends the attributes of tragedy and comedy. The form is called Tragicomedy. It elicits both tragic and comic feelings. A tragicomedy normally has two plots that must eventually merge.

Instructor Omar SaadoonAyyed