Viewing Aristotle’s framed conceptions of Tragedy in light of the modern world

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Abstract: Tragedy is a dramatic form in which the spectators derive their catharsis or pleasure from the suffering of the protagonist who undergoes hamartia or tragic flaw. Aristotle formulated Aristotle’s poetics to define the structure under which a drama has to fit in, in order to be called a typical tragedy or tragic drama. In this paper, I would like to view Aristotle’s conceptions of tragedy in the ever changing world, while focusing specifically upon the texts, “The Death of Tragedy” by ‘George Steiner’ and “Modern Tragedy” by ‘Raymond Williams.’

Keywords: tragedy, The death of Tragedy, framed conceptions, heroism, Judaic vision, irreparable, Steiner, revolution, Aristotelian tragedy

Tragedy was originated in ancient Greece to worship the deity Dionysus. Since Aristotelian tragedy focused on the invocation of catharsis in the audience, it is interesting to see that George Steiner sees tragedy as a form of drama that is not universal. According to him, the major intention of a tragedy is to represent the personal anguish on a stage before the spectator, as he feels that personal suffering and heroism are two distinctive features in western drama. He calls this very idea of tragedy as ‘Greek.’ This Greek idea of tragedy is not universal as tragedy is alien to the Judaic sense of the world which is focused upon the idea of justice. Steiner tries to establish a connection between Marxism and Judaism and calls the Marxism characteristically Jewish because of its assertion on reason and justice. In a way, it can also be interpreted as Steiner’s attempt to call tragedy as unreasonable and a form of drama denying justice. This is the primary reason, according to him, behind the rejection of tragedy by Marx. Steiner draws parallel between Judaic vision and the vision of Greek tragic poets. In Judaic vision, the moral failure is something, of which a person holds a complete responsibility, whereas in Greek tragic poet’s assertion, moral failure of a person is not completely in her/his hands. There is a presence of supernatural energies around us, behind the destruction of the protagonist. He sees continuity between the knowledge and action in Judaic vision, whereas in Greek, he sees a rift between
the two. Tragedy, as he sees, is irreparable and emphasizes upon the limitation of reason, order and justice. In this modern world, technological developments have taken place those were not there during the ancient Greek era. The Aristotelian notion of tragedy, in a way assures that advancement of science and technology to any extent can never actually do away the limitations of reason, order and justice. For anything to be defined in abstract terms, it needs to be understood rationally. Since, the things in a tragedy are absurd, according to Steiner. A tragedy can be recognized, but it can’t be defined, as Steiner says, “There is no use asking for rational explanation or mercy. Things are as they are, unrelenting and absurd. We are punished far in access of our guilt.”

Tragedy, either in Dante or Chaucer’s opinion, is not necessarily associated to drama. Not all tragedies were intended to be performed on stage. The Latin tragedies and the some plays of Seneca and Terence were meant to be narrated by a single narrator. This narrator was sometimes the poet himself. The fall of the great princes or high men and the change in their fortunes also affected the fortunes of the entire community they belonged to. Medieval English poets like Chaucer associated the idea of fall of great personages with Christian conception of the generalized fall of man. The English drama during the Tudor and Elizabethan period linked the rise and fall of protagonist with the emblematic wheel of deeds. So, as the English drama developed, various symbolic elements such as wheel, mirror tree branch, signifying the rise and fall of a man during life, also emerged. An example of this can be seen in the early Elizabethan tragedy of ‘Jocasta’ where wheel symbolizes the fatality of human life. The medieval English drama started viewing and representing tragedies in the light of Christian ideas and attempted to associate them with Christian concepts. However, some of the things in the Elizabethan tragedies, like the representation of the noble character of the protagonist and his fall very ‘Greek’ in their essence. According to Steiner, in Elizabethan theatre, idea of tragedy lost its medieval directness. Feeling of tragedy overshadowed the sense of life. An irreparable rift if inhumanity was created. This tragic feeling was not only restricted to the dramas, but many romantic prose and poetries were also written that were tragic in their themes. However, prose and poetries were not designated as tragedies. A status of a tragedy was restricted to a drama dealing in tragic matters. But this posed a question, as Steiner raises upon the designation of all such plays, as tragedies in true sense. Regarding his tragedies, John Webster made an apologia for not producing ‘a true dramatic poem’ that is in severe accord with Aristotelian percepts. However, according him, the fault was not his, but of the new public
ie. Elizabethan and Jacobean. The new audience as he said, were unworthy of “the old state and splendor” of tragedy. This could also be understood as audience’s demand for a form of drama which was not restricted to Aristotelian percepts, something they had never seen before. The audience was now enchanted by the Shakespearean drama which invoked enthusiasm in the audience and also had provided them with something new every time. Elizabethan playwrights seemed breaking many Aristotelian conventions. One of them was intermingling of tragic and comic. Tragic and comic sense of life must be kept apart, according to Steiner, and a true poet will not “match hornpipes and funerals.” But now, clown could be seen on tragic stage, literally representing themselves as fools in a world of sane people, and metaphorically signifying their wisdom in a world full of insanity. Sidney considers a play’s idea of imitating the events that took place over years, into a play of several hours, as totally absurd. Shakespeare, on the other hand, took a way out of this problem. As Steiner says, “his characters grow old between the acts, and in Winter’s Tale some sixteen years go by between the opening discord and the final music.” As many neoclassicist poets carried forward the Aristotelian perceptions, some of the Elizabethan playwrights too ransacked Seneca’s rhetoric ideas of ghosts, blood, horror and violence. But, this did not deny the fact that many playwrights including Marlowe and Shakespeare chose to move away from the Neo classic model of tragedy. According to Steiner, one of the reason was that the preference of public changed. They now wanted to see romance and turmoil of tragicomedy. A simple plot now bored them. Steiner compares the Shakespeare’s vision of drama with that of Dante by naming Shakespearean drama as an “open’ form of stagecraft. Whereas, Dante’s vision, in his words, “bends all light rays towards a controlling centre.” Understanding the complexity of life and emotions in the new world, Shakespeare made sure that these complexities of tragic and comic are reflected in his plays. His plays were more open and irregular, moving away from some medieval framed notions and conceptions. Despite of all this, it would be wrong to say that Shakespeare abandoned the medieval resonance. One can’t understand history of his old plays without understanding the legacy of symbolic proceeding which he carries forward in his plays. It is interested to see how Shakespeare successfully escaped the ‘fascination of Hellenic’ whereas others such as Ben Johnson and Sidney hold the idea that tragedy owes the debt of recognition from their Greek predecessors. Shakespeare gave his own touch to tragedy and shaped them in accordance to the changing world and audience.
According to Steiner, tragedy is unreasonable. In this modern world, the growing influence of reason and science can be considered as a primary reason behind the rejection of tragedy. As a result of it, in modern age, a few tragedies have been written, as Arthur Miller says in his essay ‘Tragedy and the Common Man’. This is because of the lack of tragic heroes amongst us. Even if we have, a large number of modern audience can’t relate to him/her. A modern man is so scientific in his approach that he can’t make a heroic attack on life. His approach is reserve and skeptical. This is why there has emerged a gap between a modern man and tragedy. We see tragedy as something which is either too low for us to understand because it lacks reason, or too high that it can only be associated with the highly noble kings and characters. In neither of the case, a general modern audience relates to a tragedy. According to Raymond Williams, a spectator should be a distant detached observer rather than being a participant. If a spectator becomes a participant of a tragic play, s/he will judge the play on the basis of the principle of the very world s/he rejects. In order to avoid this, Bertolt Brecht developed the form called epic, which he believed, emphasized upon thinking above in contrast to Aristotelian drama which enforced ‘thinking from within’. Brecht calls sufferings unnecessary as he says, “The sufferings of this man appal me, because they are unnecessary.” Here he emphasizes that suffering, that is unavoidable and controlling key in a tragedy, is not only avoidable, but that it is not avoided. He hands over an optimistic idea of seeing the world as new tragic consciousness has now emerged in the people. Due to this consciousness, people are aware to avoid suffering which they could not avoid earlier. A new kind of struggle has begun against the suffering and people have learnt from their earlier sufferings. Raymond Williams has tried to link this suffering in tragedy to a more generalized kind of suffering in the modern world. This suffering is in, as he says, ‘the identification of a political system’, and in the ‘finding of hope in the fight against it.’ The suffering caused by the political system has led to various revolutions in the world. The revolutions, too, have caused sufferings. In a world full of revolutions, where its people have learnt to stand up against their sufferings, in hope to create a better life, according to me, there is no place for Aristotelian tragedy.

References

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