TRAGEDY AND MORAL LESSONS

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Abstract

Tragedy is a complicated and elusive form. Its very nature is shrouded in mystery that has often caused misleading understanding. Tragedy is not just a story with sad ending. It has its own concept related to the people’s life in the past. It was, for the ancient Greek people, a paideia (education) derived from their strict legal codes.

1. INTRODUCTION

The word “tragedy” seems to be very common that we often hear in our everyday life. We may hear someone say, “His suicide is really a tragedy in human life,” or “The car accident was really tragic.” We sense, therefore, that we are familiar with the word, but familiarity is still far from understanding because our understanding might be misleading. What we assume a tragedy (“tragie” is the adjective form) may be only a “pathos” (the adjective form is “pathetic”). Another misleading understanding is our assumption that in tragedy the protagonist should find his death in his attempt to fight against his opponent.

Tragedy is the oldest written form of drama. It has always been a very serious nature and ranked as one of the most artistic works of civilized man. Tragedy has its roots deep in the past. Its history and concept are closely related to ancient Greek drama.

2. THE ORIGIN OF GREEK DRAMA

It has been generally admitted that the Greeks had contributed surprising elements in the development of drama. One of the famous gods in Greek mythology was Dionysus, god of grape and fertility. People believed that Dionysus provided them with wine; therefore, he deserved to be worshipped. At appropriate times of the year, especially at the time of harvesting grapes, people gathered together to celebrate the event and for it an altar was provided on which a goat was sacrificed. People flushed with wine for they believed that the more ecstatically they conducted the celebration, the more religious the result was.

People sang and danced around the altar, enacting the various part of choral lyric which was related to the story of the god’s career. In time a leader came to be separated from the chorus to recite the main part of the story. The celebration became known as the tragoda or tragodia (literally means “goat song”). This shows that Greek drama was religious in its origin, not theatrical, and represented simple rustic affairs (Macgowan, Kenneth and William Melnitz, 1971: 15).

The true drama was born when a prominent dramatist had a brilliant idea as to introduce a real actor who impersonated character in the performance. It caused the chorus to be relegated to the background. His name was Thespis* who lived about 550-500 BC. Although this innovation might seem insignificant, it was an extraordinarily critical step in the evolution of Greek drama. Actor incidentally meant “one who answers” in Greek, which was precisely what the actor did; he answered the questions and lyrical recitations of
the chorus. Consequently, the chorus could engage in conversation and address the actor. The chorus represented the demos (literally means “the people”).

The second actor was added by Aeschylus (525-455 BC), and thus heightened the possibilities of dramatic action. Indeed, it is only with Aeschylus that drama as a theatrical form came into being. He first saw the possibility of depicting the incidents of a story in purely dramatic form, a possibility opened up by the addition of the second actor. He first brought “antagonist” face to face, thus enhancing the central element of drama: the conflict of opposing views. Aeschylus extant plays are Seven Against Thebes, Prometheus Bound, and a trillogy: Agamemnon, Choephoroi, and Eumidies.

Sophocles (496-406 BC) added the third actor. He has been considered the greatest among the Greek dramatists. He had a long, prosperous, and extremely productive life, producing 123 plays, and won 24 victories in the Greek festivals. The most famous plays now extant are Oidipus Tyrannus, Antigone, Electra, Oedipus at Colonus, and Ayax. (Allison, Alexander W. et.al. 1979: 33-34)

3. THE CONCEPT OF TRAGEDY AND ITS MORAL LESSONS

The stories which the Greek dramatists presented were mostly community property, preserved from generation to generation. The stories occupied a central place in the education (the Greek word was paideia) of the people. As the Greek people at that time had no any holy book which might guide their lives, they were forced to rely on their intellect for the solution to the question of good and evil, not on the revelation. In their search for controlling principles by which to conduct their lives, they developed moral and religious codes derived from strict legal codes, the central of which was harmony, proportion, and justness (Hubenka, Lloyd J. and Reloy Garcia, 1973: 97).

The central personage of Greek tragedy was the warrior hero. He was the embodiment of the old ideal “arete”, a prowess or strength that had brought him glory and fame and made him a leader. He appeared as one who had achieved everything in his life, both fortune and esteem. But by the end of the play this good fortune was apparently revealed as hollow; the hero was brought to suffering and ruin. He was trapped in a situation in which any action taken by the hero would be morally unacceptable. He attempted to fight, because he didn’t want to give up, but his attempt ended in failure. The fact that Oedipus commits sin unknowingly or that Agamemnon sins against his will, makes no different whatsoever. This is the sin of hubris or hybris (an illegal action). Once a man commits hubris, moira (fate) steps in to bring him suffering to correct the upset balance. Dike (justice), however should be maintained. The hero is aware of his guilt and punishes himself.

The above explanation shows us some important points about Greek tragedy.

A. The hero is a person who never gives up. He will fight, although he realizes that his opponent is stronger and more powerful and that he will finally be defeated.

Antigone in Sophocles’ Antigone defies Creon, the powerful king of Corinth. She strongly opposes the law issued by the king although it risks her own life,

Creon: And you presumed to disobey these laws?
Antigone: Yes. For it was not Zeus who made this edict,
And justice, dwelling with the gods below,
Had never set such laws as these among men,
Nor did I think your edicts of such force,
That you, being just a man, could override
Unwritten and unchanging laws of gods,
Their life is not of now or yesterday.

That I must die, I knew. Why should I not?
(Antigone in Mackendrick, Paul and Herbert Howe, 1975: 162)

Antigone, sensitive to the obligations of religious duty and family devotion, insists that those obligations are superior to any imposed by Creon, regardless of the price she must pay for her disobedience. King Creon, on the other hand, is equally convinced that law and order, enforced by his authority, are of primary importance. Antigone, however, is finally defeated, but her attempt to fight against injustice and her sacrifice are not in vain.

B. The Greek hero always feels responsible for what he has done. He never tries to escape from his responsibility. Antigone never shows her regret at having opposed Creon, while Oedipus in Sophocles’ Oedipus Rex, after realizing that he himself is the sinner, is ready to sacrifice his sight by blinding his own eyes with Jocasta’s brooch and Jocasta, Oedipus’ mother-wife, hangs herself.

C. The Greek hero or heroine meets his or her fate with such dignity and determination. He/she never shows any sign of fear; he/she even challenges and fights back. In Aeschylus’ play, Prometheus, the title character, one of the tragic characters says, “On me the tempest falls. It does not make me tremble.” (in Mathews, Brander, 1966: 43) Similarly, in Sophocles’ Antigone the protagonist says, “Meeting my death this way does not pain me.”

D. Ancient Greek plays teach the audience about dictatorship and democracy. Antigone, a Sophocles’ play, presents the conflict between two theories of government, the dictatorial one pronounced by Creon and the democratic one urged by his son, Haemon.

Creon : Is not the City thought to be the ruler’s?
Haemon : That is fine! To rule alone, the land is deserted.


The Greeks held “Dionysus festival” every year from which the people took moral and religious lessons. The Greek drama was, therefore, religious in nature and intended to teach people, while dramatists were highly respected by the people,

Since Greek tragedy was inextricably bound up with religion and dedicated to the edification of the people, the dramatist was considered a most important figure in the spiritual life of the people. He was, in a sense, a priest and spokes- man for his people. (Hubenka, Lloyd J. and Reloy Garcia, 1973: 96).

4. CONCLUSION

Horace’s idea Dulce et Utile (poets should either teach/instruct or delight/please) was apparently applied by Greek dramatists. As a device for teaching people, a very positive element resides in the tragic heroes or heroines. This positive element is reflected in a good moral lesson that can be briefly stated, “In defeat the heroes or heroines of tragedy triumph. They lose, but in losing, they win.” In other words, we can say that the protagonist of tragedy although physically a loser, is morally a winner. This paradox gives traditional tragedy much of its resonance and meaning and explains why the audience or readers are exhilarated by it.

Another positive element in Greek tragedy is the protagonist’s feeling of responsibility. It teaches man not to escape from responsibility for what he has done. In Greek tragedy the responsibility is shown by performing direct punishment to himself. He doesn’t have to wait punishment from gods. Incident or story that has sad ending can not be automatically called a tragedy. A car accident
which causes many casualties or a young man who commits suicide is not tragic, but merely pathetic. Tragedy implies struggle. It is the most dominant characteristic of tragedy; on the contrary, in pathos man doesn’t show any sign to struggle to overcome his difficulties, he even tends to give up easily.

Now the word “thespian” means “connected with drama”, while “thespian art” means “drama”.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Brander, Matthews, 1966. The Chief European Dramatists (from 500 BC to 1879 AD).