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A Comparative Study of Classical and Modern Tragedy in Form and Content

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to compare classical and modern tragedies in form and content. It is descriptive-analytical research using library resources. According to studies, classical Greek tragedy is nearly devoid of comedy and humor, yet seeing the absurd behavior of some characters and their telling retort may elicit a brief smile. However, the authors and actors of tragedies and sad plays made up for this by composing half-human, half-goat plays by dividing the fourth part into four plays, four dramas, or three tragedies and one satire. It was a humorous parody of the comfort one feels after being wholly depleted emotionally by compassion and fear. However, Ibsen used mostly realistic techniques in his plays like "Desire Under the Elms," the modern tragedy can employ a wide variety of techniques. Nevertheless, O'Neill ventured to employ the expressionist style in "The Emperor Jones" and "The Hairy Ape." Although modern tragic theory primarily highlights the impossibility of creating modern tragedy, tragic art is still alive in terms of the various possibilities presented by the settings, which range from ornate to abstract scenes. Tragedies are not all modern theater, and they have never been all of the theater at any time.

Keywords: *Classical tragedy, Modern tragedy, Realist methods, Tragedy actors*

INTRODUCTION

The history of tragedy in theater spans three main epochs: ancient Greek tragedy, the Renaissance, and the modern era. While there are differences and similarities in the form, characters, and tragic aspects of tragedy throughout these three periods, the tragic hero's fate is a recurrent theme in all three. Due to various circumstances, including supernatural powers, gods, beliefs, religious views, crises, and social acts, playwrights in every period have addressed this issue in their works in different ways.

Greek tragedy has been contentious throughout human history, and critics and pundits have endeavored to expose the negative aspects of this great discovery of human civilization in every era. Studying Greek tragedy from the standpoint of social connections has always been significant and problematic since the blooming of Greek tragedy coincided perfectly with Athens's political and social heyday. As a result of the tragedy's ability to provide its audience with a genuine, profound, and tragic experience, people gain a broader perspective on life.



The tragedy that expands existence is possibly the most realistic picture of life. Even if tragedy is not the same as life, it shares many characteristics, like being complex, bitter, and hopeful. This profound awareness of the human condition enables us to feel the horror and the depth of those experiences which place man before man. Tragedy confronts man with pain and suffering that leads to enlightenment and vision.

Today's tragedies seldom draw big crowds, unlike those of ancient Athens or early 17th-century England and France, and neither are they directed at the city's entire population.

Since the 19th century, when Büchner and Kleist paved the way for Ibsen and Strindberg and their followers, Chekhov in the Moscow theater revealed tragedy as a comedy in its bottom layer and became an art form for those few individuals who detached themselves from the daily world. These art-loving audiences do not just sit back and take it when playwrights or novelists try to express themselves; they actively react against them. The authors also attempt to remind their audiences of a fact they will frequently be well aware of by the work's conclusion. This acceptance will occur peacefully and in various ways. Sometimes one of Harold Pinter's profound silences reveals the play's conclusion. As in *Nostromo*, Joseph Conrad's desperate look at the future sometimes. Sometimes in the consul's death, the main hero of "Under the Volcano," which at the same time seems wholly appropriate and appropriate, and sometimes during the silent targeting of Evans, the artillery corporal, in "Events while guarding the Bofors Gun." The audience is not affected by the sense of exaggeration and artificiality in such situations. It seems as though everyone has accepted that in a time when empty sounds around us are filled with turmoil, no one dares sing the voice of destiny. Nonetheless, it is arguable that there has never been a more layered understanding of the tragedy at the story's conclusion (Clifford Leech, 2020, pp. 130 and 131).

The personification of godly events, such as Zeus' birth, his marriage to Hera, Demeter and Persephone's anguish, and, most significantly, in Pelops and Attica, Dionysus's death and resurrection, were among the many reasons that contributed to the emergence of tragedy. The Greek name for these performances was *Dromena*, which means "occasion" or "event," from which our English word "drama" was formed. In Sicyon, in honor of Adrastus, the ancient monarch of that region, group songs were chanted until the time of Cleisthenes, while in Ikaria, a goat was offered to Dionysus. Perhaps the goat song, which signifies tragedy, began as a supplication to this god. This study examines the similarities and differences between classical and modern tragedies.

Classical Tragedy

The term tragedy and its dramatic form originated in ancient Greece. No definitive conclusions can be formed, and nobody knows how the tragedy was uncovered. One hypothesis asserts that tragedy is the origin of religious rites commemorating the death and resurrection of the "god of the year" in ancient Greece; the term was identical to Dionysus or the god of wine and vegetation (Holtan, 2010, p. 156). Tragedy evolved from Dionysus' secret event, which Aristotle mentions in his treatise on poetry, while also attributing tragedy to heroic poems and dithyramb. Tragic events must have a spiritual basis before they have a historical origin, which links Wagner and Nietzsche to a single origin and race through music and theatre; however, Nietzsche talks of a single race (Zarrinkoob, 2019, pp. 82 and 83).



According to one hypothesis, tragedies are the product of rites honoring killed heroes, and these ceremonies were political measures that helped ancient Greece transform from a tribal to a political society. Other explanations assert that tragedy emerged due to the need for an efficient narrative manner. These hypotheses are worth contemplating since they all make some logic when taken as a whole. Sadly, there is no way to confirm the validity of any of them; therefore, it is not always feasible to determine how the tragedy occurred. However, it is known that up until 534 BC, tragedy was a constant component of an annual spring festival at Athens that featured a competition, awards, and the theft of the year's prize by a man named Thespis. Aristotle later compiled and examined a group of plays with some characteristics of his poetry (Holtan, 2010, p.157).

According to Aristotle, tragedy is an imitation, which most likely refers to "the first pattern of occurrences." The action must be dramatic and staged as a tragedy, and it must be of sufficient duration for the audience to view it in one sitting. Rhymes and different sorts of poetry and rhymes should be used in various parts of the play and imitated through acting.

In Nietzsche's view, the chorus is where it all began; he considers it the tragedy's genesis and the first tragedy that existed. "The entire tragedy's atmosphere was enlarged from inside the chorus, and it was at the beginning of this dramatic imagination that expanded it beyond the core of their singing." Nietzsche felt that Dionysus is the sole hero in Greek tragedy, with all other heroes serving as his stand-ins. In the Oedipus tragedy, a Dionysian mimicry of limits and the re-creation of boundaries is the most fundamental theatrical event in which, according to Nietzsche, "a person transforms before his eyes and then acts as though he had dissolved into another body and personality." When a person adopts an alien character or lifestyle, their individuality disappears, as explained by Celis. Therefore, being outside oneself and going beyond one's bounds and restrictions is part of the dramatic phenomena. Is tragedy a symbiotic union of Apollonian and Dionysian elements, or does the latter ultimately prevail? In response to this point, Celis quotes Nietzsche, demonstrating a certain harmony between Dionysian and Apollonian inclinations: "Indeed, in tragedy, the strained and difficult connection between Apollonian and Dionysian tendencies may be represented by a fraternal union between the two gods. Dionysus speaks the language of Apollo, but eventually, Apollo speaks the language of Dionysus, achieving the ultimate objective of tragedy and art."

In tragedy, poets often choose the names of people who existed because something that could happen is also believable. So if something never happened, it is not that easy to believe. However, what has happened, its possibility is no longer in doubt because if it were impossible, it would never have happened. In other tragedies, though, just one or two names are real, while the rest are fake. In some other tragedies, not a single name of a renowned person is mentioned. As with Agathon's *Anthe*, the events and names are all fictitious, yet this does not detract from its attractiveness. Therefore, there is no purpose for poets always to seek out classic tales based on our tragedies.

Whether the hero's mistake is the result of his misunderstanding or the unavoidable fate he has been dealt with, he must find himself in a dire situation. Many critics have weighed in on the moral implications of this blunder, yet Aristotle's comments leave little room for interpretation. He does not have a broad and definite guideline for it, and he arrived at it by studying the entire theater literature accessible at the time (ibid., p. 106).



Among the aspects of the tragedy, recognition plays a critical function and has a unique place. Aristotle's recognition concept is straightforward: "It is to go from ignorance to knowledge and awareness." The same recognition leads to love or hate in the characters destined to experience happiness or misery (translated by Bywater). The phrase "leads to love or hate" sounds odd in this context, given that Aristotle states that recognition might involve "transient and incidental things."

Therefore, the provided description does not appear to be particularly fitting. Hamlet's realization that the skull in his hand belongs to Yorick is an example of this type of "transient and superficial" recognition. In any event, this phrase is used in a way that makes it evident how important a part it played in forming the plot. The aspect of recognition puts the audience as close as possible to the core and premise of tragedy if we exclude the idea of coincidence that seems implied in Aristotle's statements. The aspect of recognition is more important than either of the other two cultivation factors because it crystallizes the tragedy's ultimate effect, and mistakes and tragic flaws are a necessary component of tragedy. On the one hand, explicitly perceiving things and occurrences are the same "recognition" phenomenon that we will all ultimately experience, assuming we have the chance and time to do so at the moment of death. Many of the play's protagonists, including Adolf in Strindberg's *The Father*, Hekabe and Andromache in *The Trojan Women*, and Mrs. Alving in Ibsen's *Ghosts*, encounter comparable situations. In these situations, whether the drama's heroes or we previously had a position of prominence is irrelevant.

It should be mentioned that these characters must either be required, plausible, or near to reality regarding the story's characters and the events' compilation. So that the story's protagonist, his words, and his actions are all consistent with necessity or probability, and the same pattern is observed in the story's sequence of events. In contrast to *Medea* and the *Iliad*, in which the ships desire to return and the intervention of the gods in human affairs conclude the cases, the tale's conclusion should come from the story itself (Zarrinkoob, 2019, p. 138). The protagonist should lean toward good or, at the very least, be in the middle of good and evil; his tragedy should be more the result of poor judgment than intrinsic wickedness. This specific point was essential to Racine. He was cautious not to give him the moral depravity that earlier narratives assigned to heroines in a way that would make her anguish more spectacular in the preface to *Phèdre*. A tragedy's characters need to be presented convincingly and correctly, and they should have their consistent mental personality intact from the beginning to the end of the play. Furthermore, the audience should see the characters' actions as natural consequences of their temperament (Viegnes, 2011, p.76). The tragic hero's status as a king, queen, prince, or member of a privileged family is worse than a mere historical twist because of ethical responsibility and the requirement of facing tragedy with integrity. Due to their position and prestige, the duties of these individuals are higher, as are the consequences of their actions; not only is their fate often their property and kingdom, but they also serve as role models for others who do not attain such a position and status. The purpose of tragedy seems to be to remind individuals that they live in a restless world where decisions are reflected or spread like ripples in a pond. However, the world of tragedy is not an indifferent world for people, despite all its ambiguity and horror. In Greek tragedy, the gods are frequently involved in human affairs, but in Shakespeare's plays, human acts may disrupt the cosmic order (Holtan, 2010, pp. 163-159).



In many respects, the chorus is the most essential and costly component of the performance; in certain situations, the play is even named after it. The poet and playwright communicate most of their philosophical and religious beliefs and thoughts via this category. As everything begins with songs, the history of the Greek theater is a depiction of the futile attempts of the chorus to master the core of the play. However, under Thespis and Aeschylus, its part declines as the number of performers rises, ultimately disappearing altogether in the third century's theatre. The individuals who make up the chorus are not professional singers; they are often selected from those who have a passion for singing. All of these individuals are male, and there were 15 in each group at the time of Aeschylus. They sing, dance, and move in a luxury procession on a long, narrow stage, changing and interpreting the performance with their poetry, movements, and words (Shadravan, 2007, p.7).

In Athens, the audience was seated in a semicircle of several rows in an open location on a mountainside. The choir would perform on a flat platform before the orchestra's stage. Actors wore masks, footwear, and long robes while they performed scenarios set in temples, castles, or holy gardens for the audience. The audience stayed in uncomfortable chairs for extended periods, expressing their approval or disapproval of the performance and the actors on occasion. The play ran for three days during the Dionysus festival, with five plays—a comedy, a satire, and two tragedies—performed each day. Each year, the writers of tragedies invited to participate in the competition submitted four pieces, either Tetralogia or with no specific link between them, and they were all used solely for preparing the chorus for the performance of Didascalía. Aside from the three tragedies he staged, the tragedian poet always delivered a satirical play (Zarrinkoob, 2019, p.93 and 94).

As part of his definition of tragedy in the sixth chapter of Poetics, Aristotle also addressed the issue of language, "Tragedy is an imitation of a serious deed in a language decorated with all kinds of ornaments." Then, using this concept, he stated that certain ornamental portions are created by "balance" and others through "singing" (Malekpour, 1986, p.70). Regarding linguistic characteristics, the remaining dramatic works from ancient Greece can be split into two groups. In the first category, the action is sacrificed for the beauty and depth of the language. Aeschylus's works, particularly *Prometheus Bound* and *The Persians*, provide an authentic example of such language. The second category includes works that combine prose with rhyme, which Aristotle thought was the ideal linguistic form. Sophocles' plays provide an excellent example of this kind of language.

In Greek tragedies or tragic philosophy, predestination is a vital force. Many different versions of this agent, from different tragic authors' points of view, may be found in their works. Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides have all dealt with this topic in the same way, based on their mindset and views, but none of them has been able to disregard this important aspect of Greek philosophy (Karimi Barnaaji, 2020, pp. 43 and 44).

Modern Tragedy

Darwinism, Marxism, and Freudian psychoanalysis are the three primary intellectual traditions from which modern tragedy sprang, so the argument goes (the latest productions of the human mind). When unnecessary and inexcusable simplifications are disregarded, a concise analysis of the impact of these three schools of thought is possible. The first of these three believes that the physical and social environment entirely shapes human existence and that people live in a world where survival belongs to the most ruthless and physically robust



individuals. The second person brings up the same survival issue and compares it to economic battles, where a person is trapped in a historical process that divides the haves from the have-nots. The third person is more concerned with the internal battle for existence and sees humanity as the victim of its hidden urges, libido, and ego.

However, when the playwright addresses each of these ideas, he places the human product at the heart of the theater, for which he has long fought stubbornly: self-expression, meaning-discovery, humility in the face of superiors, authenticity in one's self, and the quest for life's ultimate significance. Therefore, despite Professor Ferguson bemoaning the breaking up of nature's glass, the tragic mirror always dramas dim lights and is even less promising and recognized but alive and still moving in time, which is the critical reflection that arises from these shattered parts in modern tragedy.

Modern tragedies have an identifiable protagonist and a multidimensional antagonistic symbol, albeit not in the same sense as traditional tragedies; the antagonistic symbol may be internal, environmental, or economic. Due to the open and flexible nature of the form that arose at the turn of the 20th century, it is no longer feasible to discern the classic elements of modern tragedy, such as the typical setup of the action's growth, the climax, and the action's decline. However, these tragedies have the reversal of irony that Aristotle defined centuries ago. In a cruel twist of fate, Mrs. Alving learns the truth about her son's fatal condition just as she is beginning to reclaim her sense of joy in life. Furthermore, every incident in Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* is logically connected to subsequent occurrences in a causal chain. While the hero's death is not usually the result of modern tragedy's action, it is never the tragedy's predetermined outcome when it happens (Roberts, 1998, p. 96).

The realism and simile of actors and audience are typically sought after in contemporary theater. We make up the actor to intensify this simile to help create the belief that Holbrook is Mark Twain. Contrary to ancient Greek and contemporary theatrical players, modern Japanese actors don smileys to mimic fictitious characters, but they do not lead us to assume that they are the drama's characters (Holtan, 2010, p.39).

How has attire evolved in modern tragedy, and what does Melpomene (Muse of tragedy) wear in our time? The hero's first old ornament to be discarded was the royal crown. Early in 1731, George Lillo wrote a prelude for his tragedy *The London Merchant*. In Lillo's tragedy, the hero is preferably an apprentice London merchant, mocking the idea that only royalty is susceptible to tragedy due to some defect and miscalculation. Modern audiences may not have believed the play because of its desperation and exaggerations, but its impact went far beyond that.

The fact that Tennessee Williams' characters fought for causes other than their own was the key to his works' popularity, likely responsible for most characters in modern drama. Although their weapons are few, Amanda Wingfield in *The Glass Menagerie* and Blanche in *A Streetcar Named Desire* battle for human decency. Blanche's conclusion, in which she battles both the creature that has been reduced to an animal and her world, which has merged with the animal world, is particularly insane. If people are reduced to animal status, they lose any sense of dignity and honor. The planned activity of the tragedy must reach beyond the purely private and interior lives. The third tendency of modern tragedy is drowning the individual in the crowd, which forecasts dramatic conflict by Marxist developments about class circumstances. *The Weavers* by Hauptmann, in which there is an open struggle between employees and



employers, may be the first play of this kind. *The Adding Machine* by Elmer Rice is an example of a drama written by the Expressionists of the time that formed soon after the onset of World War I. The other works include *Masse Mensch* by Ernst Toller and the plays *Gas I* and *Gas II* by Georg Kaiser, in which the industrial system leads to the annihilation of humans. Odets's *Golden Boy* depicts a skilled and emotionally vulnerable protagonist who crumbles under the weight of financial stress. *Antigone* by Anouilh praises the antagonist's resistance to bureaucratic oppression. Brecht, whose works cannot be called tragedies, is considered the most important spokesman of this class (Roberts, 1998, p. 96-94).

After the 17th century, tragedy writers had to choose between adhering to the neoclassical norms derived from Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides or continuing Shakespeare's "open-air" theater tradition. This conundrum of two opposing circumstances was challenging in and of itself, but it concealed a far more significant uncertainty. Could a contemporary author create a tragic drama that would not be regrettably eclipsed by the triumphs of the Greek and Elizabethan era? Is it possible to write the term tragedy on a white piece of paper without being overcome by the omnipresence of Oedipus, Hamlet, and King Lear? Lessing and the Romantics argued that it is possible to hold on to the conviction that the living should not genuflect before the dead, despite the stark contrast between Sophocles' and Shakespeare's ideas of tragedy. Nevertheless, the facts are indisputable, and during the time of Ibsen, Chekhov, and Strindberg, the dilemma of tragedy is shaped by the twofold inheritance of the classical past and the Elizabethan era. All following authors looked up to these two landmarks and based their efforts and ambitions on drawing comparisons to these two eras. Before Ibsen, the focus of literary language had to shift from poetry to prose, and he was chosen to be the first author who did not adopt the ideal of the tragic form in his work from any of the models of ancient times or Shakespeare. These two main concerns, namely the splendor of the past and the degradation of the present, were first identified in the late 17th century, and any inquiry on the character of modern theatre should begin with this topic (Steiner, 2020, pp. 45 and 46).

Despite the efforts of many playwrights of the time to avoid utilizing the tragic element in its traditional definition, its covert presence can frequently be detected in their works. The works of Harold Pinter (1960's *The Guard*), John McGrath (1966's *Events while guarding the Bofors Gun*), and Tom Stoppard (1966's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*) are just a few examples.

Today, regular individuals fill the role of heroes on television since practically all outstanding people have personal lives and are also ordinary. However, when these ordinary individuals appear on the stage or the pages of a novel, they may captivate our minds and hearts more than those with a superior standing (*ibid.*, pp. 60 and 61). If the author of a tragic work puts the main character at the heart of the plot, it is reasonable to assume that this character enjoys special status and significance. The hero can reach this prominence through intuition, inspiration, awareness, and recognition due to the uniqueness of the pain he undergoes or the hero's defining virtue. It will be difficult for the audience to accept the tragic figure without these characteristics (Leach Clifford, 2020, p. 55).

Although no one nowadays regards the chorus or the triple unity rule as vital components of tragedy, our historical understanding of tragedy will be incomplete without them. In the debate of ancient Greek plays, it may be stated that in most performances, but not in



Eumenides, the presence of one of these two is contingent upon the existence of the other. In most tragedies written after the Renaissance, such as *Romeo and Juliet* and *Faust*, whether or not they contain an official chorus, the role of the chorus in its classical definition is typically allocated to the characters gathered around the tragic hero. Sometimes, among these people, a specific character explains some issues. In the English and French dramas in the 19th century, a rational character was the voice of wisdom or the representative of common sense. The drama's main characters usually try to ignore this wise voice at their own risk and by taking many risks. It is characteristic of dramas that rarely qualify as tragic, whether the protagonists follow a wise character's advice in time or because of the sad conclusion. As in *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray* (1893) by Pinero, it is connected with a delightful feeling of ease for everybody. In most situations, it can be claimed that those saved from tragedy in modern tragedies are akin to the chorus in ancient tragedies (ibid., pp. 118 and 119).

The characters in modern tragedies have been influenced by the realism trend, which may have obscured, at least in part, the genre's fundamental essence. Nevertheless, modern tragedy authors have benefited enormously from the class-conscious designs of the past. In *Mourning Becomes Electra*, O'Neill understood this via the Civil War. French authors (including Hauptmann) resorted to the traditional tales of the Trojan War once more. In *The Crucible*, Arthur Miller referred to the Salem witch trials, while in *The Royal Hunt of the Sun*, Peter Shaffer utilized a period and place that was not on a map.

Conclusion

Tragedy is a form of drama related to luck and bad luck, happiness and misfortune, and finally, it deals with disasters and misfortunes that happen to people in positions of authority. Characters such as Oedipus, Agamemnon, Antigone, Hekabe, Romeo and Juliet, Antony and Cleopatra, Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth, and Samson are tragic and sad because of their noble qualities, honor, magnanimity, enthusiasm, love, and excitement. They possess exceptional virtues that set them apart from regular men and women, yet these qualities cannot save them from self-destruction and destruction. These virtues cannot avert the demise of the tragic characters, whether inflicted by themselves or by others.

Classical Greek tragedy is nearly devoid of comedy and humor, yet seeing the absurd behavior of some characters and their telling retort may elicit a brief smile. However, the authors and actors of tragedies and sad plays made up for this by composing half-human, half-goat plays by dividing the fourth part into four plays, four dramas, or three tragedies and one satire. It was a humorous parody of the comfort one feels after being wholly depleted emotionally by compassion and fear.

Ibsen used mostly realistic techniques in his plays like "Desire Under the Elms," the modern tragedy can employ a wide variety of techniques. Nevertheless, O'Neill ventured to employ the expressionist style in "The Emperor Jones" and "The Hairy Ape." Although modern tragic theory primarily highlights the impossibility of creating modern tragedy, tragic art is still alive in terms of the various possibilities presented by the settings, which range from ornate to abstract scenes. Tragedies are not all modern theater, and they have never been all of the theater at any time.

In contrast to the classical dialogue, everything in modern tragedy is about emotion and will, action and response, and no space for consciousness rises above the current moment. The



audience practically has no choice but to recognize the hero, the hero who appears before him alive, determined, and active, and the soul and soul of the audience are drawn into the drama. However, unlike an audience of classical tragedy, the hero's self-awareness, rather than sympathy or dread, stirs his soul. Instead, the human stage and the standing man make the audience feel like the actor's companion and a part of the drama.

The modern hero's consciousness is inevitably constrained, and he cannot be expected to be innately aware in his moments of solitude. Awareness ought to be whole and distinct at all times, yet limiting consciousness lacks these qualities. The hero must so fully comprehend both himself and the outside world. Therefore, modern tragedy proposes an aim completely distinct from classical tragedy: realizing the tragedy of the absolute man in his connection to the subject.

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