

Reflection of Aristotle's Theory of Tragedy on Shakespeare's Macbeth

Md. Shahazada Basunia

Former Faculty Member

Department of English

Dhaka International University

Keywords:

Theory of
Tragedy,
Tragic Flaw,
Pity, Fear,
Catharsis

Abstract: In the Tragedy of Macbeth by William Shakespeare, Macbeth fits the definition of an Aristotelian tragedy. Macbeth is a tragic hero because he starts by being loyal and trustworthy, develops a tragic flaw that leads to his downfall, and he redeems a small measure of himself before he dies. An Aristotelian tragic hero is a person who is born into a noble family and who, by fate, has a tragic flaw that ultimately causes him or her to fall from grace but who ultimately redeems them by the end of the tragedy. Due to his efforts to redeem a small portion of his nobility, Macbeth is a tragic hero. By persevering in battle until the very end, he atoned for his sins. Despite knowing his fate, he persisted in fighting. After all that he has done, Macbeth also feels guilty. That demonstrates that he still has a conscience and some redeeming qualities. The entire plot of Macbeth reflects the Aristotelian Tragedy theory. The article makes an effort to demonstrate how Macbeth and Aristotle's idea of tragedy are related.

Introduction

After analyzing Aristotle's concept and applying it to Macbeth's persona, the tragic hero category can be properly applied to the play Macbeth. Macbeth is portrayed as an out-of-control lunatic who is determined to realize his heinous, self-indulgent aspirations throughout the entire play. In the long term, he struggles but is powerless to stop his inevitable death. Aristotle has defined tragedy as "an imitation of an action, serious, complete, and of certain magnitude, in a language beautified in different parts with different kinds of embellishment, through actions and not narration, and through sense of pity and fear bringing about catharsis of these emotions." Aristotle placed character in the background of tragedies and gave greater weight to the storyline or action. A tragedy's action must be full and comprise a logical progression of circumstances. It needs to have a start, middle, and end. Six components of tragedy—plot; character, thought, spectacle, and song—have been emphasized by Aristotle, with the first two occupying a prominent role. The first three of the six elements are internal, while the final three are external. Tragic art imitates action and life, not human beings. The tragic hero transitions from happiness to pain via frailty or some sort of error in judgment but is neither a villain nor particularly noble. His action causes the onlookers to feel dread and pity before purging them of these impurities. Consequently, a tragic hero should embody both human imperfection and morality. His disaster should result from a mistake in judgment, and he must drop from a lofty position of glory by making serious errors. His deeds should elicit the sad feelings of sorrow and terror. We can fully see how Aristotle's theory of tragedy is reflected in its entirety if we study the tragedy Macbeth. The play's principal themes support the initial aspects of Aristotle's definition, which state that Macbeth is a serious story. The play's opening lines set the tone by introducing witches who discuss witchcraft and apparitions. The three witches not only contribute to make this a serious tale, but they also appealed to Elizabethans who at the time believed in such paranormal occurrences. Given that battle has always been associated with bloodshed and family strife, the conflict between Scotland and Norway had a sinister undertone. This terrible work also deals with the Thane of Cawdor's impending execution as a result of his deceiving the monarch. When discussing the gravity of the drama, murder is a key component throughout the entire Macbeth. From the outset, Lady Macbeth exhorts Macbeth to take any action necessary to depose King Duncan, the monarch of Scotland, the position for which Macbeth

yearns so fervently. With the aid of a gang of killers, Macbeth is able to assassinate King Duncan, Macduff's wife and children, and Banquo, a valiant general who will succeed to the Scottish throne. Shakespeare also employs strong vocabulary and words throughout the entire play, even if such gloomy events are designed to evoke a serious mood. Such as when Lady Macbeth calls upon the gods to make her man like so she will have the courage to kill King Duncan herself in this quote, "Come you spirits that tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here."

Methodology

The present study is qualitative research. It focuses on the question that how do things work, so it surrounds 'How' and 'Why.' The output of this research is in the detailed descriptive form. In this study a secondary source of knowledge has been adopted. Needless to say, it is an empirical study. A good number of magazines, articles, reports and research articles have been considered for this article to show the relationship between Macbeth and Shakespearean tragedy. Both exclusion and inclusion criteria were followed to adjust with the overall objective of the study.

Macbeth as a Tragedy According to Aristotle's Definition

Shakespeare gives us a full action in Macbeth, one that has what Aristotle calls a beginning, middle, and end. These segmented parts must satisfy the requirement of their particular placement, which they do in the instance of Macbeth. "The separate parts into which tragedy is divided are: Prologue, Episode, Exodus, Choric songs, this last being separated into Parodos and Stasimon," according to an excerpt from Aristotle's "Poetics." The entire section of a tragedy before the Parodos of the Chorus is referred as the prologs.

The Episode is the entirety of a tragedy that is sandwiched between two full choral tunes. The complete tragedy known as The Exodus lacks a choral tune to follow it. Of the choric part the Parodos is the first undivided utterance of the Chorus." Shakespeare follows this precise arrangement of parts to tell his story of Macbeth. There are five acts in Macbeth. It is the only one of Shakespeare's plays without any choral music, but it does have a prologue, episode, exodus, Parodos, and stasimon. This nevertheless adheres to Aristotle's core idea of a plot, hence Macbeth is still considered a tragedy in the Aristotelian sense that the succession of events and acts organizes itself into a "causally related," cohesive whole.

Exposition, Inciting Action, Rising Action, Turning Point (Climax), Falling Action, and Denouement are the optimal order for action in a plot. Each of these procedures is followed by Macbeth, who also poses a fresh query every few minutes to hold our attention. To maintain the audience's attention at all times is what is referred to as dramatic tension, and it is a crucial component of a tragedy. According to Aristotle, the story must have an activating circumstance, a disclosure, and a reversal of action in order for the plot of Macbeth to be considered a full action.

The three witches in Macbeth are the initiating event. Three witches who have supernatural abilities meet Macbeth and Banquo and foretell their fates. The play's wicked sisters' part includes portraying the forces of destiny. These ghouls push Macbeth to commit suicide. Their prophecies are Macbeth's temptations. Nothing the witches did drove Macbeth to carry out the horrific deeds he perpetrated, and they never inform him that he needs to do anything. But their forecasts increased his yearning for the throne and fueled his ambition, which is the trait that ultimately brought him to ruin. When something in the play is revealed, the audience learns something they did not know before, that enables them to put the pieces of the tragedy together.

In that point, the tragedy's storyline was revealed to the audience, and it became clear that Macbeth and Lady Macbeth had ruined themselves via their own bad deeds. The reversal of action is the final requirement for an Aristotelian full action. When Macduff murders Macbeth, this happens. Due to his wicked ambition, Macbeth pursued his goals throughout the entire play. Even subjecting himself to evil sins, but it is at the very end where his.

According to Aristotle, tragedy is the most sophisticated kind of poetry that deals with lofty subjects, whereas comedy is the most sophisticated form of poetry that deals with mundane subjects. Aristotle

defines tragedy according to seven characteristics: (1) it is mimetic, (2) it is serious, (3) it tells a full story of an appropriate length, (4) it contains rhythm and harmony, (5) rhythm and harmony occur in different combinations in different parts of the tragedy, (6) it is performed rather than narrated, and (7) it arouses feelings of pity and fear and then purges these feelings through catharsis. The six elements of a tragedy are story, character, thought, diction, melody, and spectacle, which are enumerated here in order of importance. A well-written plot must have a beginning that is not a required result of any earlier activity, a middle that follows logically from the beginning, and an end that does not necessitate any additional action.

A reasonably noble hero must fall from bliss to sorrow due to the hero's own mistake for a tragedy to elicit sympathy and dread from the audience. When family members hurt one another rather than adversaries or strangers, we feel more pity and anxiety. The finest plots have a character who narrowly escapes accidentally killing a family member thanks to an anagnorisis that identifies the relationship. The hero should be portrayed genuinely and consistently, and must possess virtues befitting of his or her status.

The "essence of the tragedy" is the tragedy's plot. The plot is the most crucial component of a tragedy since it imitates actions rather than people. The plot must revolve around a single event in life and be kept to a manageable length for the audience's memory. F.B. Leavis agrees with Aristotle's definition in his essay entitled —Tragedy and the —Medium,¹ where he states that —the tragic... establishes ... a kind of profound impersonality in which experience matters, not because it is more... but because it is what it is.² In other words, the experience, or action, of the plot is the most important element of a true tragedy.

A playwright's choice of experience to write about may shift with time. The Macbeth schemes, for instance the assassination of the king is central to the plot of Macbeth. The stability of the monarchy and the lives of the king and his court were of utmost importance throughout the turbulent middle Ages, which is when Macbeth is set. Shakespeare was unable to depict the life of the average peasant guy on stage because their lives were so unimportant. Thus, the events at the royal court are followed by the plot of Macbeth. The monarch is assassinated by Macbeth, a general in the king's army and Thane of Glamis, in order to satisfy his ambition for power. This quest for power ends in destruction for Macbeth and order is finally restored to the kingdom.

Aristotle ranked diction fourth in significance, stating that it is the "statement of meaning in words; its essence is the same in both verse and prose". Language is crucial in communicating the actions. It is written in prose, without a doubt. Since Macbeth is written in verse and follows the poetic tradition of tragedy, which Aristotle used to define tragedy, it is simpler to identify Macbeth as a tragedy.

Aristotle placed character second in order of importance for the six elements of tragedy, because the action, or plot, of the tragedy surrounds a central character. This central character is called the tragic hero. Aristotle states that —there may be [tragedy] without character³ because in his opinion —most of our modern poets fail in the rendering of character⁴. The Greek tragedy writers that Aristotle studied for his definition of tragedy were those contemporary poets. Because the chorus was so frequently used in Greek tragedy, the tragedy possibly could have been presented without a main figure. The chorus's use has decreased over time as tragedy has evolved somewhat. The lack of a chorus has heightened the significance of character. The tragic hero is —a man who is not eminently good and just, yet whose misfortune is brought about not by a vice or depravity, but by some error of frailty⁵ most commonly known as the tragic flaw.

Shakespeare's tragic hero is more in line with Aristotle's definition. This brings up the fact that theater was written about those who are very recognized and affluent in Shakespeare's day and in Aristotle's. One of them is Macbeth. When Macbeth first appears to the audience, the King has recently won a crucial battle. According to Aristotle's definition, a human soul is the ideal realization or expression of a natural body, which Macbeth adopts (Aristotle). His actions were guided by an internal feeling that soon brought him to his main objective. He has had great success in combat and is well known as a commander in the King's army. Macbeth seems to be quite content with his place in life until he meets the three wayward sisters. He is a fairly young man in love with his beautiful wife. He is the Thane of

Glamis and becomes the Thane of Cawdor after winning the battle. Most importantly he is loyal to the King. The three wayward sisters present Macbeth with tempting prophesies. Macbeth's tragic flaw is that he loses his will to fight the temptation for the power that will come when those prophesies are fulfilled. Furthermore a tragic hero like Macbeth does indeed have "secret flaws in their personalities" as Aristotle believed. From these events Macbeth turns into a raging machine, although to Duncan he appeared to be "as an angel of light; inwardly, he ravening wolf in the service of darkness".

This makes it clear that Shakespeare did not write Macbeth's stirring, poetic plot as easily as it could have appeared. The first objective of Macbeth is accomplished through its portrayal of a serious subject. Without this essential element of tragedy, someone who was formerly steadfast but gives in to hunger one day and overindulges on chocolate cake after losing a conflict with greater vigor might be called tragic.

But that does not really make sense. There is seldom a funny scene in Macbeth, and hardly any decision is taken without terrible consequences—usually leading to the death or saving of someone's life. Following his succumbing to his desire to become king after being lured by the witches' prophecy, Macbeth leaves an increasing number of dead victims in his trail as his ambitions increase and his morals declines. Macbeth first gains public admiration for his bravery and heroism in battle. In the end, many people have perished in order to satisfy Macbeth's whims, and as a result, Macbeth must also be killed. Aristotle's principles that a tragedy must be full and of a particular magnitude are likewise met by Macbeth in this regard. The end of Macbeth's journey into lunacy, along with Macduff's dismissive comments, "Hail, King! For So Thou Art: Behold Where Stands the Usurpers Cursed Head: The Time Is Free," completes the tragedy. The severity of Macbeth's situation is twofold: it is of a great scale literally because Macbeth has made himself the king of Scotland, and as such, is responsible for the lives of all of its citizens (not a responsibility that should be given to someone who can be so easily influenced by his cunning wife or his own emotions), and it is of a great scale figuratively because he grows more and more conceited, that is, only concerned with himself, and starts to act in.

Another crucial component of the Aristotelian tragedy is a tragic hero with a tragic flaw clearly, Macbeth fits this description. Like all of Aristotle's theories, the tragic hero is quite precise and must adhere to a number of requirements. Aristotle believed that the main character of a tragedy should not be so admirable that, upon learning of his or her demise, we feel only outrage rather than sadness or dread. Additionally, the character must be so wicked that we wish for their bad luck out of a sense of justice.

Best, on the other hand, tragic hero refers to a person "who is neither exceptional in virtue and righteousness, nor is it by his own badness or villainy that he falls into misfortune, but rather via some fault." Macbeth is first introduced to us as a war hero, For valiant Macbeth, he merits that name disregarding fate with his brandished blade, which smoked with bloody execution, like a valor's minion carved out his route, until he faced the slave; a man who has displayed bravery in combat, but is still just an ordinary guy.

He is comparable to a contemporary firefighter who has saved a person from a burning house; a hero in his community but not one who is untouchable. Introducing the terrible defect. A tragic fault can be a moral weakness, as in the example of Macbeth and his lofty ambition, or an intellectual blunder or mistake. This previously minor flaw is what traps Macbeth's will and, as he acknowledges in his first soliloquy, sets him on the path to moral decline.

Perhaps when the tragic hero's fate changes, that's when the audience's sympathy for them really starts to grow. This is due to the fact that the tragedy of the hero is not fully revealed until the moment of the character's impending demise. Macbeth is a jerk who has fallen from grace but is still a jerk when he gets away with killing anybody he wants. When things start to go wrong, however, the audience realizes that Macbeth is to blame for everything. If only he had shown a little more courage, or if only

he had not put so much faith and hope in the witches, or if only he had not listened to his wife, etc, all of this trouble would not have been fall him.

On a sympathetic level, the audience feels sorry for poor Macbeth, and on an empathetic level, they worry that perhaps they too might fall victim to the same character flaws. Aristotelian plays are those that are successful in eliciting empathy and pity from their audience members. Even the most resistant observer will be able to relate to Macbeth's in-depth portrayal of the tragedy on both the internal (Macbeth's mental and emotional pain as portrayed through his soliloquies and paranoid conduct) and exterior (the ruin of empires and the ending of lives) levels. The use of exaggerated language is a crucial supporting element to a tragedy's impact and its Aristotelian status. Anything written in Shakespearean English today seems brilliantly enriched to the modern reader, but that is unimportant. The use of dramatic speech has the power to entirely alter the mood of a performance and put the audience in a different state of mind. It removes the audience from reality and ushers them into a more dramatic, romanticized realm. If a fantasy world is compelling enough, the observer may even feel actual emotions there; a phenomenon known as catharsis in modern times but purgation of sad and dread in Aristotle's time. Catharsis should occur if the other Aristotelian components of a tragedy come together appropriately. The audience empathizes with the characters in Macbeth, growing furious at Lady Macbeth's plotting, lamenting the death of Duncan, ultimately feeling regret for Macbeth's scheme and so on.

More Tragic Elements - Thought, Spectacle and Song

In tragedies, the tragic hero and the three other components such as thought, spectacle, and song are used to arouse sympathy and dread in the audience. In order to scare the audience into panic and cause them to feel sympathy for the fallen guy, the playwright sets up a seemingly ordinary scene in front of the audience. The dramatist accomplishes this by providing us a likable, passably decent center figure, as was previously mentioned. Aristotle claims that he also employs reason, spectacle, and song to arouse pity and fear. The playwright is attempting to make the scene seem natural by using language and cognitive patterns from today. By developing people for the terrible incident who are connected to one another, the author generates spectacle. Greek tragedies typically featured characters that were linked to one another, like a mother and her son. This spectacle custom has been preserved.

The playwright's final strategy for inspiring pity and dread is the use of music. Song "takes the primary place among the embellishments" in tragedy, according to Aristotle. Songs have become less common in tragedies, along with the shift from verse to prose and the decline in chorus usage.

Conclusion

A definition of tragedy must exist in order to define the genre before it can be given the name tragedy. Though Aristotle's definition of tragedy is not considered always as an absolute one, but it does seem to be a decent starting point. For an art form that is constantly evolving, a precise description is really not attainable. As a result, each drama must be evaluated on an individual basis before being given consideration for the tragic genre. Two of the most evident changes in the tragedy are the change in language and the emphasis on character. To perceive the poetry and meaning of the tragic experience in the tragedies written today, one must investigate past the words and into the character and his experience. If Aristotle had ever had the opportunity to see Shakespeare's Macbeth, he would have glowed with pride because it satisfies all of his criteria for a proper tragedy. The characters in Macbeth don't seem to be cardboard cutouts; instead, they appear to have real life, real virtues, and real weaknesses, with the latter being particularly evident in the case of the play's main character. It is without a doubt no coincidence that Macbeth is one of the most well-known dramas ever written, as it is a tragedy in the classic Greek sense.

References

- A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy* (London: Macmillan, 1904), p. 358.
- Aristotle. —Extracts from the *„Poetics“* 41-50.
- Bradley, A. C. *Shakespearean Tragedy*, London: Macmillan, 1905.
- Booth, Stephen. *Macbeth, Aristotle, Definition, and Tragedy*, New Haven: Yale UP, 1983.
- Driver, Tom F.. *The Uses of Time: Oedipus Tyrannus and Macbeth*, New York: Columbia UP, 1960.
- Draper, R.P., editor. *Tragedy: Developments in Criticism*. London: Macmillan, 1980.
- French, Marilyn. *Shakespeare's Division of Experience*, New York: Summit. Books, 1981.
- Goldman, Michael. —*Speaking Evil: Language and Action in Macbeth* | *Acting and Action in Shakespeare Tragedy*, Princeton: Princeton UP, 1985.
- Greenblatt, Stephen. *Shakespeare Bewitched*, Princeton: Princeton UP, 1993.
- H. B. Charlton, *Shakespearean Tragedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1948), p. 141.
- James L. Calderwood, *If It Were Done: —Macbeth| and Tragic Action* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1986), pp. 77–89.
- Kirsch, Arthur. *The passions of Shakespeare's Tragic Heroes*, Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1990.
- Leavis, F.B. —*Tragedy and the „Medium.“* | *The Common Pursuit*. London: Penguin, 1993.
- McElroy, Bernard. —*Macbeth: The Torture of the Mind* | *Shakespeare's Mature Tragedies*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1973.
- McAlindon, T. *Shakespeare's tragic cosmos*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991.
- Murray, W. A. —*Why was Duncan's Blood Golden?* |, *Shakespeare Survey* 19, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002.
- Mustafa, Mustafa. (2011). *Ambitious For Power in Shakespeare's Macbeth*. ATAVISME. 14. 101. 10.24257/atavisme.v14i1.107.101-102.
- —Notes for a Lecture on *Macbeth* | [c. 1813], in *Coleridge's Writings on Shakespeare*, ed. Terence Hawkes (New York: Capricorn, 1959), p. 188.
- Russell, Willy. *Education Rita*, ed. Richard Adams, London, 1985.
- Shakespeare, William. *Macbeth*. John F. Andrews, editor. London: Everyman, 1993.
- Scot, Reginald. *The Discoveries of Witchcraft*, ed. Montague Summers, London: John Rodker, 1930.
- Shakespeare, William. *Macbeth*, ed. Kenneth Muir, London and New York: Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1994.