

The Essence of Shakespearean Tragedy

By David Chandler

[In the late 1960's Dr. Wickes taught a Shakespeare class at Harvey Mudd College attended by more "Scripsies" (humanities majors from the liberal arts college across the street) than "Mudders" (us science and engineering types). A few of us cut class one day for some reason I can't recall, and in so doing we missed a quiz. At the next session Dr. Wickes asked the class what he should do with the slackers who missed the quiz. Someone in the back of the room called out, "Make them write a paper on The Essence of Shakespearean Tragedy. He followed the suggestion and this paper is the result. Although the question was posed lightly, I thought it was a significant question and pondered it long into the night. Before handing our papers back Dr. Wickes started class by saying he wanted to read us something. He proceeded to read my entire paper and announced to the class that it was written by a Harvey Mudd student. I think that incident did something to my self concept. I had never seen myself as a writer. My sister is the writer...my strengths were science and math. This effort and the praise I got for it taught me not to limit myself by defining myself too closely.]

"A Shakespearean tragedy is a five act play ending in the death of most of the major characters." This statement with others of its kind may accurately describe many of Shakespeare's plays, but if we are looking for the essence of Shakespearean tragedy we must look in an entirely different realm. We cannot merely list the literary devices used, find the ones common to all of Shakespeare's tragedies, and call this collection their essence. We recognize tragedy in literature because we find that it corresponds to a sense of the tragic within us.

The essence of Shakespeare's tragedies is the expression of one of the great paradoxes of life. We might call it the paradox of disappointment. Defeat, shattered hopes, and ultimately death face us all as human beings. They are very real, but somehow we have the intuitive feeling that they are out of place. They seem to be intruders into life. Tragic literature confronts us afresh with this paradox and we become fascinated by it.

From this viewpoint we must look at the literary techniques in the plays not as definitive elements of tragedy but as expressions of it. Thus, hypothetically, someone could discover a long lost Shakespearean play that could truly be considered a tragedy yet lack any or all of the tragic devices common to Shakespeare's existing tragedies. The fact is, though, that certain literary devices recur regularly. Hence we may infer that these are particularly useful devices for expressing tragedy, or at least that they were particularly useful to Shakespeare.

Let us consider several characteristics common to Shakespeare's four great tragedies. Each play is especially concerned with one central figure or tragic protagonist. Hamlet, King Lear, Othello, and Macbeth are the protagonists of their respective plays. It is significant that each is the story of a man because the paradox of tragedy in real life is experienced mostly by individual men. Thus as we identify ourselves with the protagonist the sense of tragedy is aroused in us. The protagonist is therefore portrayed vividly as a believable human being. Traits may include strength of character as in Othello, intelligence and cleverness as in Hamlet, foolish vanity as in King Lear, and even treachery as in Macbeth. We are led to identify ourselves with the protagonist as in Hamlet's soliloquies we share the thoughts that only Hamlet knows. Similarly in Macbeth we find ourselves let in on the plot to murder Duncan and we hear the prophecies that motivate Macbeth. Such characterization of the central figures is well suited to expressing tragedy.

Each play contains an element of hope that is disappointed or ambition that is frustrated. Here is the acting out of the disappointment paradox. Macbeth is the most straightforward example. Macbeth murders Duncan with the assurance of good reward. He then enters battle with what again seems to be positive assurance. Only when it is too late does he realize that he is being led to his destruction.

Hamlet also has a central, well considered ambition, but its result is not so straightforward. Hamlet wants to avenge his father's murder, but the whole matter is so entangled with every thing from petty court rivalries to national politics that his success is accompanied by disaster.

And let me speak to the yet unknowing world
How these things came about. So shall you hear
Of carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts,
Of accidental judgements, casual slaughters,
Of deaths put on by cunning and forced cause,
And, in this upshot, purposes mistook
Fall'n on the inventors' heads.

Hamlet V ii

Finally, we should consider a very prominent part of all four tragedies: death to the protagonist. Death is important in expressing tragedy because it is at the very heart of the paradox of disappointment. For secular man and even for many religious men death brings final conclusive disillusionment to every meaningful hope. It is the embodiment of defeat. In the tragedies under consideration, death is not used as an extreme expression of human suffering. Rather it is used symbolically to emphasize the disappointment and defeat that accompany it. The symbolic character of death is especially notable in Othello's suicide. Iago's treachery caused several other deaths but not Othello's. Othello's suicide is a response to his despair. The tragedy in Hamlet is not specifically Hamlet's death, but the overall miscalculation and unnecessary

bloodshed. Hamlet's own death merely confirms the disaster.

We have said that tragedy deals with one of the great paradoxes of life. It does not propose a solution to the paradox. It does not tell us that life is meaningful in spite of defeat and disappointment, nor does it point to despair and proclaim the worthlessness of our hopes. Rather it affirms the paradox and challenges us with it.