TRAGEDY: An Introduction

Just as automatically as we associate comedy with laughter, we associate tragedy with death. And just as was the case with the relationship between laughter and comedy, a Renaissance tragedy--though it will always include at least one death--is not actually about death. Or, to put it another way, it is not precisely the death(s) that makes the play tragic. A great deal of ink has been spilled by critics trying to theorize the experience of tragedy; in this introduction I will briefly summarize a few of the most influential of those theories and then discuss at some length the approach I'd like us to focus on in this course.

I. Aristotle, The Poetics

Undoubtedly the most influential book of literary criticism ever written, Aristotle's *Poetics* is the first written attempt to theorize the complex experience of Greek tragedy. Using as his chief example the plays of his contemporary, Sophocles, and particularly Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex*, Aristotle talks about the enormous suffering and violent action (both physical and mental) that take place in any tragedy and identifies the chief emotions associated with these plays as pity and fear. His main task in the *Poetics*, however, is to describe the structure of the tragic plot:

a) the plot must include a hero(ine) who has distinguished him/herself as "great" in some significant way
b) the hero commits some sort of violation, which Aristotle calls hamartia
c) there is a notable reversal or plot twist as a result of that violation, which Aristotle refers to as peripeteia
d) the hero suddenly recognizes his/her own responsibility for that sudden change of fortune, called anagnorosis
e) the tragedy ends with a purging of the emotional catastrophe (for both the characters and the audience), often the death of the hero at his/her own hands; Aristotle calls this catharsis

II. The Experience of Tragedy

In many ways, Aristotle's description of the form of tragedy, which I have only briefly outlined, will be useful to us in our reading. The form alone, however, does not adequately account for the complexity of the tragic experience, it does not even tell us what kind of experience tragedy is and that's where more recent critics come in. Tragedy has been variously described as:

a) Moral experience: The characters, and the audience, learn some sort of lesson as a result of the hero's catastrophe.

b) Personal/Psychological/Emotional experience: This is a mainly secular reading of tragedy that stresses the growing self-knowledge of the hero. Tragedy, in this instance, rehearses the limits and the hidden resources of the individual self.

c) Theological experience: Suffering makes us noble, it grants a kind of dignity to the actions of a character who cannot control his or her own destiny but who is neither exempt from making decisions. The emphasis here, as in (b) above, is almost completely on character: the tragic hero(ine), and that character's relationship with some sort of divinity. "Transcendence" is the key word in this approach to tragedy: the tragic hero(ine) is not even quite human because of his/her relationship to the divine impulse. In Frye's scheme, tragic heroes are usually seen as a type of Christ, sacrificing themselves in a transformative act that might be described as redemptive.

d) Social experience: If the emphasis in Frye's approach is on Fate, conditions otherworldly around which the hero(ine) cannot move, a description of tragedy as primarily a social experience would stress the more materialist social/political forces that impinge on the hero(ine), fate. Choice (or lack thereof), in this formulation, is not determined by God, but by oppressive social practices and beliefs, often in flux, that entrap the hero(ine).

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