

Tragedy in the modern age essay



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Tragedy in the Modern Age: A Short Note ARPA Dakar The genre of tragedy as a form of dramatic art developed in the ancient Greece out of the ritualistic performances in the honor of the pagan deity Dionysus. Aristotle formulated his theory of tragedy on basis of the plays composed by the then Greek tragedians like Aeschylus, Euripides and Sophocles, and he regarded these plays as the most comprehensive instances of this genre.

Plays by Roman tragedian Seneca, and those by such Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists as Marlowe, Kid and Shakespeare are also generally considered the examples of tragedy par excellence spite their notable differences from the Aristotelian norms. It is also generally considered that the art of tragedy writing declined in the post-Shakespearean age, and that no proper tragedy has been written after the seventeenth century. ' Modern tragedy itself is a question-begging term, and it is a matter of dispute whether some problematic plays of the late nineteenth and the twentieth centuries are to be categorized as tragedies at all.

Broadly speaking, the term ' modern tragedy refers to plays that present the miseries of the human condition in a tragic way , but do not employ with either the Garage-Roman or the Elizabethan standards of tragedy in respect of both theme and technique. Tragedy-writers of the modern era do not depict the factorization of a ' hero' as caused by the adversities of Fate or by his preordained and inevitable errors. Tragedies of the modern times abandon the conventional rhetoric and themes that have long been considered essential for tragedy.

Protagonists in modern tragedies not only lack the 'heroic' stature like that of Rooster, Oedipus, Hamlet, Lear or Macbeth, but effectively minimize and question the scope of the heroic in tragedy. Instead of the grand themes of classical and Renaissance tragedies, modern tragedies concentrate on the ordinary, commonplace events of modern social and domestic life, and seek to reveal the immanent tragedy of the human condition as necessitated by the present socio-economic paraphernalia. One most conspicuous feature of the so-called 'modern tragedy' is its conscious effort to redefine tragedy and to reformulate its schemes.

Norwegian dramatist Henries Ibsen first presented an alternative tragic discourse in such plays as *A Doll's House* (1879), *Ghosts* (1881), *An Enemy of the People* (1882) and *Head Gabbler* 1890). In these plays the tragic factorization of the protagonists is brought about by the incompatibilities of the socio-domestic institutions and customs, by ethical and ideological predicaments, and even by political randomization. As a playwright John Swallowwort's concern is with social injustice, economic inequalities and moral and legal paradoxes.

These issues have been traumatized in his plays like *Strife* (1909), *Justice* (1910) and *Loyalties* (1922). Italian playwright Lugging Primordial's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921) dramatists the problematic in the theatrical rendition f a tragic story, and presents the incompatibility of professional and artificial stagecraft in performing the true essence of tragedy. R. C. Sheriffs plays *Journeys End* (1929) and *The White Carnation* (1953) deal with the tragic waste of life in the political game of warfare.

Eugene O'Neill in his trilogy *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931) reworks upon the myth of Roasters to depict the conviction of the Mammon family in the turbulent social context of the post-civil War America, in close parallel with the Aeschylus prototype, and thus seeks to explore newer scopes of tragedy in the contemporary social context. J. M. Synge in *Riders to the Sea* (1904) presents the miserable living conditions and tragic deaths of the Aran islanders; in spite of its compact single act structure and use of the contemporary verbal idiom, this play parallels classical tragedies in terms of the universalistic of human agony and suffering.

American playwright Arthur Miller strongly purports and seeks to validate a non-Aristotelian definition as well as multiplicity of the scopes of tragedy through such plays as *All My Sons* (1947), *Death of a Salesman* (1949) and *The Crucible* (1952). In the 1957 Introduction to his *Collected Plays* Miller writes, "It is now many centuries since Aristotle lived. There is no more reason for falling down in a faint before his *Poetics* than before Euclid's geometry".

Claiming that the determination of the anxiety and suicidal death of Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman* is "a genuine solid gold tragedy", Miller states that in "the tragic viewpoint there are and will be a great number of formal variations which no single definition will ever embrace". The Theatre of the Absurd, which is a major trend in the twentieth century English drama, problematizes the age-old definitions of both the genres of tragedy and comedy.

Such plays as *Waiting for God* (1955) and *Endgame* (1958) by Samuel Becket, *The Bald Prima Donna* and *The Lesson* by Eugene Ionesco, *The Birthday Party* (1958) by Harold Pinter, *Reassurances and Guilelessness Are Dead* (1966) by Tom Stoppard and *Lear* (1972) by Edward Bond cannot be categorized as either tragedy or comedy. These plays treat grave and often harrowing subjects in an apparently lighthearted manner, verging on farcically; but all the same such plays manifest the true notion of the tragic that is inherent in the perception of absurdity, alienation and existential crisis in everyday life.

The scope of tragedy has evidently much evolved since the time of the Greek-Roman masters in accordance with the constantly changing socio-cultural and intellectual paraphernalia. In modern times this change has been radical enough to question the validity of the conventional definition of the genre of tragedy. Dramatists of the twentieth century merely respond to the gradual process of the generic evolution of tragedy and seek to find suitable definitions by exercising with the current forms of dramaturgy.

The so-called 'modern tragedy' is therefore not any unitary genre as such, but rather a current, experimental and variable form of the present status of the genre of tragedy. This note has been made on basis of the following books: *The Theory of Drama* by Aristotle (Methuen, 1974), *A Dictionary of Literary Terms* by J. A. Cuddie (Penguin, 1982), and *Tragedy (The Critical Idiom)* by Clifford Leach (Routledge, 2002). ARPA Dakar is an M. A. In English literature from University of Calcutta Contact: Com