

Northrop Frye's Critical Theories on the Shakespearean Tragedies

Ishraq Bassam Al-Omouh

The World Islamic Sciences & Education University

Abstract

Northrop Frye was a literary theorist and one of the most influential twentieth-century critics. In his masterpiece, *Anatomy of Criticism*, Frye attempts to formulate an overview of theories, genres, and techniques of literary criticism. Among the genres Frye sheds lights on is 'tragedy'. 'Tragedy' is basically defined as a genre that treats the dilemma of a heroic figure and the terrible and the sorrowful events that he encounters in a serious and dignified style. This paper tackles the concept of tragedy in accordance with Frye's critical theories. For Northrop Frye, tragedy is not only associated with the sorrowful events encountered by the tragic figure that eventually lead to his death; the concept of tragedy and the tragic figure is based on the hero's integration or isolation from the society he is involved in. More particularly, the paper examines how Frye explains the structure of the Shakespearean tragedies especially in his *Fools of Time: Studies in Shakespearean Tragedies*. He divides them into three sub-categories: tragedies of order, tragedies of passion, and those of isolation. So the current study focuses on the structure of some Shakespearean tragedies such as *Hamlet*, *Othello* and *Julius Caesar* in accordance with Frye's critical theories.

Keywords: "Shakespearean Tragedies", "Northrop Frye's Criticism", "Tragic figure or hero", "tragedies of isolation", "tragedies of order", "tragedies of passion"

1. Introduction

Tragedy has always been a dramatic genre that presents a serious matter and depicts the human suffering. In various tragic plays, the playwright always depicts a situation that deals with terrible (tragic) events and has unhappy ending, especially one which concerns the downfall of the tragic figure or the protagonist. Most critics agree with what is explained in the *Poetics* of Aristotle on tragedies. Aristotle compares tragedy to other forms as comedy and epic. He determines that tragedy, like all poetry, is a kind of imitation (*mimesis*), but he also explains that it has a serious purpose and uses direct action rather than narrative to achieve its ends. So the poetic *mimesis* is imitation of things as they could be, not as they are — for example, of universals and ideals.

In his article entitled *The Concept of Tragedy in Modern Criticism*, George Kimmelman remarks, "while it is true that, as many literary historians have shown that the historical development of tragic literature itself as effected changes in some phases of the Aristotelian concept, almost all modern critics still insist upon definite criteria which most characterize a drama, for instance, before it can be accurately described as 'tragic'. Kimmelman also adds, these criteria include "(a) the 'struggling' protagonist who pits his 'will' against his fateful antagonists, the Gods, Nature, Society, or his destructive impulses; (b) the mode of 'exaltation' associated not only with his 'heroic' deeds, but also with the end for which he is destroyed; and (c) the power to achieve a 'catharsis' by means of 'pity' and 'fear' (The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism, 141).

2. Northrop Frye's Critical Theory on 'Tragedy'

In his *Anatomy of Criticism*, Northrop Frye sets the ground for the conception of tragedy and the tragic figure. His division of literary works, whether tragic or comic, is based on the hero's integration or isolation from the society he is involved in, therefore, he says, "there is a general distinction between fictions in which the hero becomes isolated from his society, and fictions in which he is incorporated into it" (*Anatomy* 35). In his *Fools of Time: Studies in Shakespearean Tragedy*, Frye sheds light on Shakespeare's tragedies. He divides them into three sub-categories: tragedies of order, tragedies of passion, and those of isolation.

Frye prefaces his argument on the Shakespeare's tragedies by showing us the debt he owes to Greek and Elizabethan tragedy. He explains that "death is what defines the individual, and marks him off from continuity of life that flows indefinitely between the past and the future. It gives to the individual life a parabola shape, rising from birth to maturity and sinking again" (*Fools* 3). More importantly, Frye suggests that tragedy "revolves around the primary contract of man and nature, the contract fulfilled by man's death, death being, as we say, the debt he owes to nature." And what makes tragedy tragic, and not simply ironic, is the presence in it of a counter-movement of being that we call the heroic, a capacity for action or passion, for doing or suffering, which is above ordinary human experience" (*ibid* 5). According to Greek tragedy, death is both the punishment of the aggressor and the reward of the victim, and that what makes a tragic sense rather than a moral one. In fact, the tragic figure often struggles because he has to make a specific decision and most of the time, he/she will suffer the consequences of his one decision, his suffering marks the beginning of his/her downfall.

In his *Shakespeare's Dramatic Heritage*, Glynne Wickham points out that, "Tragedy was by definition a story of a great man plunged from prosperity into adversity...." (49). However, one shouldn't stop there; tragedy often "ends with the survivors forming, or about to form, a secondary or social contract, a relation among more ordinary men which will achieve enough working justice or equity to minimize further tragedy" (*Fools* 6). The death of the tragic figure should lead to a kind of reconciliation; the community is supposed to be reunited and a new social order will be established.

Frye refers to the major role Gods have in Greek tragedy in which "they have the function of enforcing what we have called the primary contract of man and nature.....Man has certain duties toward the gods, and he expects, without the right to claim, certain benefit in return. But as long as the gods are there, man is limited in his scope, ambitions, and powers. Men in Greek tragedy are "dying ones"..." (7).

Frye's theory on Shakespearean tragedies is based on certain conceptions that have their roots in Greek tragedies as well as the Elizabethan ones. He refers to two kinds of death: one is of the ordinary kind and the other is heroic; the latter, he says, "may be directly caused by the gods out of fear or anger, or, if not, has at any rate some peculiar significance, a marking out of a victim" (*ibid* 8). Therefore, we have for example, a death that is brought about by gods (nemesis). He utilizes the term nemesis in his theory on the tragedies of Shakespeare, and comes up with nemesis-figure or nemesis-group which includes people like *Antony* in *Julius Caesar*, and *Hamlet* in *Hamlet*.

Frye keeps on referring to Greek and Elizabethan tragedy aiming to pave the way for his conceptual theories on Shakespearean tragedies. Elizabethan tragedy, he says, "not only had no gods, but was also a secular form avoiding the explicit use of Christian conceptions of deity; in contrast to the morality plays, especially *Everyman*, it gave the teachings of the church a minor role...and for the Elizabethan, the royal figure or human ruler tended to become the mythical centre of the action (*Fools* 13).

2.1. Tragedies of Order

Frye's division of the structures of tragedy is based on either the centripetal or the centrifugal direction applied while tackling a literary text. If he takes into account certain historical facts, he comes up with that kind of social tragedy that has its roots in history. But if he considers the work itself including, for instance, the relations between the characters themselves, he modulates a kind of tragedy that deals

with the separation of lovers, or he comes up with a tragedy whose major theme is the isolation of its hero. Frye eventually comes up with three sub-categories of the Shakespearean tragedies. To begin with, we have the first category which we often find in *Julius Caesar*, *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*. If we take *Julius Caesar* as an example, Frye's theory chooses Julius Caesar as the order-figure, Brutus as the rebel-figure, and Antony as the nemesis-figure in the play. These characters have certain function the play which is in line with what the concept Frye comes with suggests. The order-figure, for example, is "the character with the title-role", he is usually the king, the ruler or the leader like Julius Caesar in *Julius Caesar*; the character with whose death the tragic action begins, and the important thing about him that he is not murdered, but that he has been murdered. Second, there is the 'rebel-figure'. Or the usurper who usually stands against the king or the ruler and plans to kill him, like Brutus in *Julius Caesar*. And thirdly there is 'the nemesis-figure who is "partly a revenger and partly an avenger. He is primarily obsessed with killing the rebel-figure, but he has a secondary function of restoring something of the previous order" (*Fools* 17). The avenger will have to take revenge in order to achieve justice.

As far as *Hamlet* is concerned, the order-figure is Hamlet's father who has been murdered by the rebel-figure, Hamlet's uncle or Claudius, while prince Hamlet is supposed to be the nemesis-figure. Prince Hamlet wants to take revenge and he feels that he is justified though he never refers to justice or law, but to the desire to kill out of hatred. He does not plan to avenge; he avenged by the circumstances Shakespeare puts him in. Thus, he is considered partly revenger and partly avenger.

In the Shakespearean and the Elizabethan tragedies, the presence of ghosts, omens, oracles, magic and witchcraft is essential. Their role in a tragedy is either to "threaten our sense of reality with madness" or "to show up the limited and finite nature of the human perspective, especially in thought" (*Fools* 24).

Frye believes that the important thing about the order-figure isn't the fact that he gets murdered, but that has been murdered. He says, "The essential tragic action starts just after his death" (*ibid* 35). The ruler or the order-figure, according to Frye, has two symbolic aspects: there is the deposed or murdered ruler. More importantly, that order-figure like Caesar, Hamlet's father, Richard the second, the abdicating Lear, represents a lost social identity (*Fools* 37)

In Frye's point of view, the elements of tragedy as the omens, ghosts, oracles, magic and witchcraft, "threaten our sense of reality with madness: as things conceived, they show up the limited and the finite nature of the human perspective. In his *Shakespeare: The Basics*, Sean McEvoy comments, however, on the appearance of the ghosts saying, "To start with Hamlet, like his fellow student Horatio at the University of Wittenberg, doesn't even believe in ghosts. Denmark, like England, was an officially Protestant country where ghosts regarded as a foolish Catholic superstition. The ghosts can be seen as a manifestation of the old feudal values which Hamlet's father held.

Tragedy is said to be associated with the destruction of vitality in a sick society. In tragedies of order, order is being evil and so it creates a kind of rebellion against it which appeals to the sympathy of the audience. Unlike tragedies of passion, tragedies of order include the fall of older man, and "the function of nemesis-figure is to re-establish a disrupted continuity" (*Fools* 55).

2.2. Tragedies of Passion

In passion-tragedies, the tragic side is reduced to a parody. Their actions drive toward the fulfillment of love, however, they are carried though by the fairies and the tragic side of the story is reduced to parody, "so in the tragedy the drive toward the fatal conclusion is in the foreground and the unseen impulses that prompt the lovers to fall in love so suddenly and so completely are suggested only by the way of parody..." (*Fools* 60). Albert E. Clark comments on Shakespeare's lovers saying, they "partake variously of idolatry, ego, and infatuation, in the belief that theirs is the pure emotion. Only the dregs of illusion excite Antony to the knowledge of Cleopatra's nature, and even then--as witnessed in the episode with Thidias, Antony's fears are soon quieted by his persisting delusion of happiness. (7)

Finally Frye also discusses the kind of rhetoric used by the heroes of passion-tragedies and order-tragedies. Heroes of passion tragedies don't tend to use the 'hypnotic' rhetoric used by

counselors or kings. Rhetoric in the tragedies of order usually includes “a breaking social order”. But rhetoric in has “the quality of music and poetry...the concentration on pathos, and the touch of youthful narcissism.” (*Fools* 63).

2.3. Tragedies of Isolation

The last theme which this paper sheds light on is the theme of ‘isolation’ in the Shakespearean tragedies. In tragedies like them, the hero or the central figure, who is of a greater social rank, like Othello in *Othello*, and King Lear in *King Lear*, becomes isolated from the community. For instance, being black among the white Venetians, Othello becomes isolated since he does not fully understand the values of the cultures. In act III, Iago tells him, “I know our country disposition well/In Venice they do let God see the pranks / They dare not show their husbands..” (Shakespeare 3.3. 202- 204). Affected by Iago’s words, Othello then believes that it may be truly custom for a wife to cheat on her husband the way Desdemona cheated on her father as Iago suggests. Othello becomes also isolated because his experience on the battlefield is greater than his experience with women. He says, “Were it my cue to fight, I should have known it without a prompter” (Shakespeare, 1. 2. 84-85).

In his *Fools of Time*, Frye says, “We may now apply our principles of isolation to the three fold structure of the tragedy of order. We have the parody of the order-figure in the tyrant, who like Richard III or Macbeth, is the leader of the society but is not attached to it”... “The traitor, like Iago or Edmund, is a parody of the rebel-figure, whose actions dissolve and disintegrate his society...Third, we have certain characters isolated by the action of the play, like Lear or Timon, who become parodies of a nemesis-figure, making futile threats of revenge. Othello, with his talk of ‘the cause’ and of ‘sacrifice,’ is also a nemesis parody” (*Fools*, 95-96)

References

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