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HAMLET, THE TRAGIC HERO

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ABSTRACT

Hamlet has been considered one of the best tragedies of William Shakespeare. Prince Hamlet is the hero of the play. His father King Hamlet has been murdered by his uncle Claudius for the sake of Queen Gertrude and kingdom. One day the ghost of king Hamlet appears before prince Hamlet and reveals the truth. It made the prince gloomy. He decides to take revenge upon uncle Claudius and mother Gertrude. He kills Polonius, Claudius and loses Ophelia. Finally he dies in a battle with Laertes.

Keywords: Fatal, Procrastinate, Oblivious, Consistency, Prevent, Uniformity

Hamlet is the best known tragedy in English literature. The dramatist Shakespeare exposes Hamlet's flaws as a heroic character. The tragedy in this play is the result of the main character's unrealistic ideals and his inability to overcome his weakness of indecisiveness. This fatal attitude led to the death of several people which included his mother and the king of Denmark. Although he is described as being a brave and intelligent person, his tendency to procrastinate prevented him from acting on his father's murder, his mother's marriage, and his uncle's ascension to the throne.

Traits or Qualities of a Tragic Hero:

According to Aristotle, a tragic hero should have the following qualities:

(a) Goodness

According to Corneille, the term "Goodness" means 'magnificence' while Tillford considers the term to signify 'Dramatically effective'. Goodness is the basis of creating sympathy in the audience. If a person is not good, tragic emotion cannot be roused nor can tragic pleasures be imparted. It is natural that the audience on the readers would not have any sympathy with a person who is depraved. And if there is no sympathy. We cannot get the tragic pleasure that ensues from sympathy. But Aristotle does not refer to moral goodness as an essential quality of a tragic hero.

(b) Like Reality

The second quality in a tragic hero is that he must be like reality. A tragic hero must belong to his own class. He must act and behave and talk like the people of his own rank, class and status. The tragic hero must be true to his type. If he is a historical figure, he should be presented according to his traditional image in history. In fact, Aristotle gives no example to illustrate his meaning in this context. So, it is slightly difficult to access what exactly he means by the term 'likeness'. Therefore, it would be more acceptable to interpret the term as "True to Life". This likeness to life precludes the character from being either to good or utterly depraved. The tragic character has thus to be a moral person of an intermediate sort.

(c) Appropriateness

Some critics take it to mean true to type'. But Aristotle never meant character to be mere types and not individuals. According to him, characters should be true to the characteristics of their particular age profession, class, sex and status and that they should be individuals at the same time because they are 'Men in Action' as represented in tragedy.

One who has been brought up in slavery would not certainly develop nobility and heroism. So also, a woman must be shown as 'womanly' and not 'manly'. Each character should be given a role appropriate to his status or situation. But there must remain the greatest freedom for individuality in characterization. The individual may rise above the tendency to run to type. Some critics interpret that character should be appropriate to the historical or traditional portrait of him. For example, Ulysses should be characterized only as historically represented.

(d) Consistency

The fourth important quality in a tragic hero, according to Aristotle, is his consistency. Consistency is the basic need in a tragic hero. Aristotle says that even if a character is inconsistent, he should be consistently inconsistent. The character must be seen as a whole. There should be uniformity in his behavior unless there is a proper cause for any deviation. The tragic hero should act and seem to think in a manner which we can logically expect from that particular individual. His actions and words should be appropriate to what he is represented to be as well as to the situation in which he is placed.

There are many characteristics that make Hamlet the tragic hero in the play Hamlet. A few of these are that he must be person of stature of high position, he must be generally a good person, his position and actions have far-reaching effects, he must possess a character trait that would be considered a virtue. Hamlet is the prince of Denmark which defiantly makes him a person of high stature. The second characteristic is a little harder to see but in general Hamlet is a good person and matters to the viewers or readers. He is looked upon as a good person because at the start of the play he is mourning his father because of his death like any good son would do, also as mentioned in the play, the people of Denmark all love Hamlet and see him as a wonderful and kind prince. The third characteristic is also quite evident because since he is the prince all the actions that he makes have far-reaching effects which is seen from the decisions that he makes through the play. With the fourth characteristic, Hamlet's character trait, that would be a virtue but under the special circumstances is a fatal flaw, is that he is a man with great determination and won't back down once he has made up his mind.

The fifth characteristic that makes Hamlet a tragic hero is seen in most of his soliloquies. This characteristic is that even though he is a great man, he shows promise of further greatness in the future. This characteristic is seen in his soliloquies because it shows how Hamlet does have promise of future greatness if not for the path of revenge that he chose to walk down. The sixth characteristic is a major event in the play that starts the beginning of his down fall. This characteristic is that Hamlet makes a serious mistake in judgement that leads to his downfall. The mistake in judgement that Hamlet makes is that he kills Polonius thinking that it was Claudius and with that makes Laertes want to take revenge on him. In the seventh characteristic, the tragic hero must be ultimately responsible for the actions that begin his downfall. In this case, it is wholly clear that Hamlet is responsible for killing Polonius which is the beginning of his down fall and death. The eighth characteristic is that Hamlet makes further errors in judgement that follow his misdeed. This judgement is that Hamlet decides to cover up what happens and when Claudius finds out and asks Hamlet about it he doesn't deny doing it while acting mad. The ninth characteristic is that the tragic hero has a distorted perception or is blind to reality. This characteristic could apply to Hamlet as he acts mad and is usually oblivious to what is happening to the people around him,

The tenth characteristic is that the tragic hero commits further crimes which add to his downfall. For Hamlet the only two crimes that he commits before he dies is killing the king and sending Rozencrantz and Guildenstern to their death by switching the letter that Claudius originally wrote. The eleventh characteristic is that he must suffer outwardly and inwardly. Hamlet suffers outwardly because he is tortured by the knowledge of his father's death and the death of Ophelia, the woman he loved. The twelfth characteristic is that he must elicit both pity and fear from the audience. This characteristic is seen many times in the play,

Hamlet is pitied in the play when he talks in some of his soliloquies, and when he learns about what happened to his father. He elicits fear from the audience when he goes on his mad spree making the characters in the play as well as the audience fearful of him. For the thirteenth characteristic, Hamlet must recognize his mistakes. This is seen when he speaks with Laertes before they have their fencing match and asks Laertes for forgiveness for what he did and gives Laertes his love. The last characteristic is that Hamlet must die for him to be a tragic hero. Hamlet does die in the end of the play when he is poisoned during the fencing match between Laertes and himself. With this poison in his system already he will die because it is a very strong poison that with the tiniest drop would kill a man quickly.

Hamlet is in fact a tragic hero. Like other tragic heroes, Hamlet too has to face conflict, both internal and external. The internal conflict is between his moral scruples and the act of revenge which is called upon to perform. Love of his father, the dishonor of his mother and the villainy of his uncle prompt him to take revenge while his nobility, his moral idealism, his principles and his religion revolt against such a brutal act. The result is that, torn within himself, he suffers mental torture.

The external conflict is with Claudius- 'the mighty opposer' and the murderer of Hamlet's father. To Hamlet, Claudius is a smiling, damned villain, a seducer and a usurper of his rights to Denmark's throne; he is one against whom he has to take revenge. The other external conflicts are with Laertes, his friend and the brother of his beloved Ophelia, with Guildenstern and Rosencrantz, his former school fellows and friends but present enemies. Indeed Hamlet succeeds in overcoming his foes, but only at a dreadful cost.

Character is not only factor that is responsible for the tragedy of Hamlet. External circumstances are also responsible for making Hamlet a tragic hero. Shakespeare creates a feeling that there is a mysterious power in this universe, which is responsible for every small-happening. The appearance of the Ghost and its revelation is a manifestation of Fate. Many of the things that take place in Hamlet's life are by chance, but none of these are improbable. He kills Polonius by chance. The ship in which he travels is attacked by pirates, and his return to Denmark is nothing but chance. Gertrude drinks the poisoned wine by accident, and dies. So fate in the shape of chance shapes the future of all characters including Hamlet. But the sense of fate is never so overwhelming as to cast character in shade, after all, it is Hamlet himself who is responsible for his tragedy.

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