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THE VISION: COMIC, TRAGIC & TRAGICOMIC IN G. B. SHAW'S PLAYS

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ABSTRACT

Drama imitates man and nature in the most comprehensive shape of their possibilities of existence and mutual interaction and interplay. Consequently, drama reflects the serious, the light, the dark and the bright hues of life as well. Further, drama embraces life not as a reality standing still for decay and stagnation but a reality that ever changes and ever grows with a particular dynamism of its own. This makes the point that throws a light upon the development of drama as tragedy, comedy and tragicomedy. The classical approach to literature is that of attending perfection within a specified framework of norms, regulations and subject area. Evidently, the classical theorists study and analyse tragedy and comedy separately without even considering the combined shade that makes for tragicomedy. Present article delineates how classical principles regarding ideal comedy and ideal tragedy yielded to the creation of the reformed form of drama- tragicomedy and how Shavian plays bring before us the bittersweet reality of life in the modern world. These plays are rightly termed as tragicomedies.

Key words: Miracles, Moralities, poetry, tragedy, comedy.

Tragedy and comedy as two different genres of dramatic art have been drawing literary critics to put forth their theories reflecting their true nature. Aristotle's major focus in his *Poetics* is the threadbare study of tragedy – its nature as well as its utility for the audience as well as readers. Aristotle's discussion of tragedy shifts from the study of distinctions between tragedy and comedy to the distinction of tragedy and comedy as separate genres of dramatic art. He defines tragedy thus:

Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude, in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions. (*Poetics* 23)

Thus the origin as well as production of serious works of art - tragedies - has its roots in the seriousness of nature on the part of the playwright and in the very subject to be represented through action. Besides, the personages demonstrating various sorts of mood as per the requirement of the subject should also be subjected to the element of seriousness. In a tragedy insignificant problems of day-to-day life of a common man cannot provide expected seriousness to the theme. The action to be imitated in a tragedy

should be related to some outstanding problem of some eminent person emerging from some outstanding folly of the sufferer. It should be thought-provoking so that the audience get compelled in a pleasant way to exercise their moral attitude in the light of the conflict and the probable defeat of the good in the hands of the bad. On the whole, the action in a tragedy should be relating to the welfare of humanity as a whole, or should at least bear positive lesson for it. Among the Roman critics Longinus maintains that lofty thought itself is an "echo of greatness of soul". As are the soil and seeds so will be the crop. Hence is the saying that non-seriousness on the part of man debar his way to greatness in any field. All these reasons ascertain the serious nature of the writer of a tragedy. It is this quality of seriousness which imparts unity of construction and ingredients in a tragedy. The classical tragedy is a tragedy in the real sense of the word. There is no fusion of comic elements from the beginning to the end of the play for it is considered to lighten the serious nature of the play.

The creation of comedy according to the classical theories does not need an emotional loftiness of thoughts either on the part of the playwright or on that of the actors in the context. Comedy deals with the life of, no doubt, kings and queens but with light sort of happenings. The introduction of supernatural spirits like fairies and their mirth making tricks on mortal beings add extra force to the light mood of a comedy.

Tragedy is initiated with the necessity of an emotional outlet whereas comedy is initiated with an intellectual outlet. The former functions at the individual level whereas the latter functions at the level of the surrounding social context of ironies or contradicting follies and frivolities. The closer study of the Greek vision of comedy subscribes to this point most validly and most forcefully:

The Athenians observed a theory of release which would have done credit to modern schools of psychiatry. They considered it sound practice to provide outlet to the normally restrained sexual instinct and to the reflex of rebellion against custom or vested power...; one way to serve the goddess of Liberty was to offer her the burnt sacrifice of established reputations. (Gassner 79)

Thus, since ancient times comedy has served as a means to lighten the mood of man overburdened with worries and anxieties of his social life. The most significant feature of comedy is that just as classical tragedy is free from comic elements, classical comedy is written without the fusion of any tragic event and incident.

So far as the question of pleasure is concerned, tragedy of the classical age according to the classical theories provides pleasure to the audience by offering an outlet to the feelings of pity and fear- the cathartic effect of tragedy. Tragedy leaves men light and mentally refreshed for the performance of their obligations in society. Comedy, on the other hand, enlightens the heart by delineating the weaknesses of man and his society. The birth and particular sort of nature of comedy seeks resort in ancient Greece during the time of Aristophanes and earlier. Comedy was originally a fertility magic. Primitive man did not object to sexual display and even physical union. It was believed that nature would perform in the large what man enacted on a smaller scale. But all such presentations had the colouring of religion or morality. Gradually, these very practices developed in the form of satire and Aristophanic comedy. John Gassner rightly says:

The actors disguised as horses and goats or creatures half-man and half-goat known "satyrs" disported themselves in honour of Dionysus, Pan and other gods of the field and the forest. The element of release inherent in the art and the grotesque animality of the characters inevitably produced comic effects. (Gassner 80)

The element of morality in this sort of presentations is the fair side of them. For example, to celebrate Dionysus, the god of generation, wine and vegetation masquerades and processions were practised. These so-called "comuses" from which the term 'comedy' is derived consisted the sexual rites in full bloom with the actors disguised as birds, cocks, horses and dolphins. They used to carry aloft a huge phallus on a pole and sang and danced suggestively. These comic processions, with various improvements reached Athens in the form of drama presented in an orchestra in 486 B.C. This art reached its culmination in the hands of Aristophanes. It is the aspect of sexual, ritual and anti-heroic attitude of the actors which makes Aristotle declare that "comedy aims at representing men as worse" (Poetics 13) than men in real life. Comedy reached

Terence through Plautus. Terence was the poet of aristocracy, the upper classes who had refined taste. He wrote for them and improved the art of comedy but after Terence Roman drama deteriorated rapidly.

Turning to the genre of comedy in English we come across an absolutely new and peculiar form of it. It is the mixed production of the elements of tragedy as well as comedy. This half tragedy and half comedy – tragicomedy - is explained by Fletcher in the following way:

A tragi-comedy is not so called in respect of mirth and killing but in respect it wants deaths, which is enough to make it no tragedy, yet brings near it, which is enough to make it no comedy which must be a representation of familiar people with such kind of trouble as no life be questioned; so that a god is as lawful in this as in a tragedy, and mean people as in a comedy. (The Works of Francis Beaumont 18)

The term 'tragicomedy' appears first in the prologue to Plautus' *Amphytrion*. Mercury offers a valid and explicit description as the outline of the play:

...then you shall hear the argument of our tragedy. What? Frowning because I said this was to be a tragedy? I am a god: I'll transform it. I'll convert this same play from tragedy to comedy, if you like, and never change a line. Do you wish me to do it, or not? But there! How stupid of me! As if I didn't know that you do wish it, when I'm deity. I understand your feelings in the matter perfectly. I shall mix things up: Let it be tragi-comedy, of course it would never do for me to make it comedy out and out, with kings and gods on the boards. How about it, then? Well, in view of the fact that there is a slave part in it, I shall do just as I said and make it tragi-comedy. (Nixon 9,11)

Thus, Plautus' play consists of the admixture of the actions of the gods and noble men and those of the mischievous slaves of a comedy. Regarding the tragicomic nature of the plays of his age, Sidney condemns English plays for matching "horn pipes and Funerals" (The Defence of Poesy 39) Milton vindicates tragicomedy because it is the consequence of

...the poet's error of intermixing Comic stuff with tragic sadness and gravity; or introducing trivial and vulgar persons, which by all judicious hath been counted absurd. (Milton 550)

For a better and threadbare study of the origin and development of tragicomedy, it has been divided into two kinds by the theorists and practitioners of modern tragicomedy. Tragicomedies written and performed up to the seventeenth century fall in the compass of the first kind; and of the second called modern or post-Enlightenment tragicomedies are the tragi-comedies written since Ibsen. The further division presents them as the Renaissance and the Ibsenite respectively. Shaw's tragicomedies are a class in themselves. They offer the combined form of the Renaissance as well as the Ibsenite tragicomedy. Before the study of the Shavian tragicomedy, a brief glance at the distinctive features of the Renaissance and the Ibsenite tragicomedy historically by Shaw himself is required. In fact, tragicomedy eclipsed from the literary scene after 17th century to emerge again at the end of 19th century with so distinguishing features that class it as modern tragicomedy. It is Bernard Shaw who ranks among the earliest who divide tragicomedy into two categories and offer the highest place to the modern tragedy which originated from Ibsen's *The Wild Duck* (1883). Before mounting to the discussion of modern tragicomedy, it is the need of hour to reflect upon the origin and development of drama from Shaw's point of view:

... the two original human types of the long haired elocutionist posing as a man of tragic destiny, to whom it is death to be ridiculed or even passed over as a common person, and his polar opposite, the funny man, with whom it is a necessity of life to be laughed at, even if he has to undergo the most grotesque disfigurements and ignominious cudgelings to satisfy his need. These are not only aboriginal types: they are contemporary ones... Tragedy as we know it is a development from the recitation and pedestal of the one (probably a sugar box to begin with) and the circus ring and conversation with the ringmaster of the other. (Henderson 608)

Thus, long-haired elocutionist of tragic destiny turned out to be the writer of tragedy and his opposite circus clown that of comedy. In the beginning both the long-haired elocutionist and circus clown "had to keep off one another's grass because the public mood was not flexible enough to bear a mixture of the comic and the tragic into one piece." (Henderson 615) Bernard Shaw considers Tolstoy's *The Power of Darkness* and Shakespeare's *King Lear* as pure tragedies and *Merry Wives of Windsor* and *The School for Scandal* as pure comedies. Bernard Shaw considers the alternate use of tragedy and comedy in one and the same plot as a justified and reasonable practice as the one provides relief to the other.

Bernard Shaw opines that at the very outset comedy was a lawless mixture of the comic and tragic elements. Fun was there with terror standing before it and levity with gravity. Shakespeare's *All's Well That Ends Well*, *Troilus and Cressida* and *Measure for Measure* and Moliere's *Le Misanthrope* serve as specimens from the first stage of the evolution of comedy. To illustrate his view further, Shaw enters the sphere of novels and finds that the lawless mixture reaches summits in *The Wild Duck*. It yields way to the "chemical combination which makes the spectator laugh with one side of mouth and cry with the other." (Shaw 616) The drama containing this chemical combination falls in the category of modern tragicomedy.

Bernard Shaw assessing the requirement of his age prefers the modern tragicomedy to either comedy or tragedy. For Shaw, tragedies like *Hamlet* with "to be or not to be" and *Macbeth* with "Out, out, brief candle" darken the already dark phenomenon of life made so by the defective social institutions. Characters like Iago and Lady Macbeth are incredibly mechanical beings. Moreover, Shaw considers the philosophy of tragedy to be pessimistic as opposite to his own that is optimistic. In Shaw's view root cause of all problems is the evil of defective social system which can be remedied with efforts in positive direction. Therefore, Shaw discards pure tragedy.

The elements of accidents and catastrophe go against Shaw's theory which declares that life can be more tragic than an accidental death:

As a matter of fact no accident, however sanguinary can produce a moment of real drama, though a difference of opinions between husband and wife as to living in town or country might be the beginning of appalling tragedy or a capital comedy. (Shaw. Major Critical Essays 150,151)

Shaw opposes the traditional tragedy because it with horrible scenes frightens men instead of providing pleasure to the audience. Shaw writes that the pattern of tragedy that has reached us belongs to the time

when life was so thoroughly accepted as a divine institution that in order to make it seem tragic, something dreadful had to happen and somebody had to die. But the tragedy of modern life is that nothing happens, and that the resultant dullness does not kill. Maupassant's *Une Vie* is infinitely more tragic than the death of Juliet. (Prefaces 199)

Thus, Shaw is fully justified in preferring modern tragicomedy as it is "much more tragic than a catastrophic tragedy as an unhappy marriage, or even a happy one, is more tragic than a railway accident." (Shaw's Pen Portraits 263) Bernard Shaw further explains the superiority of modern tragicomedy thus:

The curtain no longer comes down on a hero slain or married: it comes down when the audience has seen enough of the life presented to it to draw the moral, and must either leave the theatre or miss its last train. (Prefaces 200)

Shaw does not tolerate a farcical comedy because without "proximity of emotion laughter, however irresistible is destructive and sinister." (Shaw's Pen Portraits 287) Shaw himself defines humour and says that humour is "anything that makes you laugh. But the finest sort draws a tear along with the laugh." (Sixteen Self-Sketches 54)

Shaw does not agree to the element of ridicule in a comedy because it hurts the victim. Moreover, for Shaw the "horrible, derisive joy in humiliation and suffering is "beastliest element in human nature." (Shaw, Our Theatre 118) Comedy of popular type is "the manufacture of misunderstanding" (Prefaces 203) which ends

happily in a mechanical way. Without the writer's optimistic and positive thinking comedy turns to be "a destructive, derisory, critical, negative art."(Prefaces 203)

Shaw does not approve of the comedy which lags behind as an instrument of social reform. Shakespeare's and Moliere's comedies serve the purpose by indicating human nature but attack is taken otherwise by practical men who turn cynical and murderous. They raise a quarrel which is against "God for not making men better."(Prefaces 201) Shaw insists upon the element of social reform because "until society is reformed, no men can reform for no man can reform himself except in the most insignificant small ways."(Henderson 614) Shaw appreciates the Ibsenite tragicomedy for its serious dealing with the realities residing in the camp of modern life. He condemns "sweet shop view of the theatre" and the "unwholesome confectionery out of cheap emotion" (Prefaces 546) that flourished in the popular theatre of his day.

This is by no means the whole story. He prefers modern tragicomedy for its concentration on social and economic evils and goes on saying that the modern tragi-comedian

can no longer be satisfied with fictitious morals and fictitious good conduct, shedding fictitious glory on robbery, starvation, disease, crime, drink, war, cruelty, cupidity, and all the other commonplaces of civilization which drive men to the theatre to make foolish pretences that such things are progress, science, morals, religion, patriotism, imperial supremacy, national greatness and all the other names the newspapers call them. (Prefaces 734)

Thus, Shaw prefers modern tragicomedy because it is "not only an entertainment but a history and criticism of contemporary morals."(Prefaces 196) It is not a "romance, but a really scientific natural history" (Prefaces 198) with absolute objectivity. He appreciates the Ibsenite tragicomedy because its didactic nature requires serious audience involvement. The modern playwright is "a ruthless revealer of hidden truth and a mighty destroyer of idols."(Prefaces 205) The writer of modern tragicomedy opens our eyes to the faulty nature of existing institutions with a view to inspire us to work for their betterment. Besides destroying our romantic ideals and unscientific social norms, these playwrights provide us "a means of foreseeing and being prepared for realities as yet inexperienced, and of testing the feasibility and desirability of serious Utopias."(Prefaces 103)

Thus, Shaw's tragicomedies may be categorized as a peculiar sort or genre which is neither renaissance, nor Ibsenite but Shavian. A Shavian tragicomedy revolves around some problem relating to social, political, moral or religious degradation of a country during certain period of history. Shaw introduces the protagonist as a redeemer for the people suffering in this mesh. But impact of Shaw's plays attains a peculiar combination of the intellectual and emotional experiences, as most often his protagonists seem to be sacrificed for the cause of improving human conditions in their own world. A Shavian comedy is serious in the sense that it bears a serious ideology but more so in the sense that it makes the protagonist suffer at a dear cost for the cause of his principles and ideological commitments. What is elevating in a Shavian tragicomedy is the fact that the protagonist paves a way for others to accomplish the task he undertakes upon him. Further, the success of a Shavian tragicomedy lies in inculcating the positive attitude among the audience towards life as a struggle for individual commitments. It is so because in a Shavian tragicomedy no god or goddess or chance creates problem. Every problematic situation has some man in the background. Consequently, it is remediable within human limits and limitations. Man prints in the book of life the dehumanizing and brutal facts which can be deleted by man's efforts only.

A Shavian tragicomedy juxtaposes a Shakespearean tragicomedy in the matters of its nature and the cause of the malady afflicting a country. It is not like a Shakespearean comedy where

an usurper seizes the throne ; God avenges his sin upon the third heir through the agency of another usurper, whose sin is again avenged upon the third heir.(Shakespeare's Histories 122)

In Shaw's tragicomedy none pays for the misdeeds of others. Moreover, a Shakespearean tragedy deals with the fall of a nation from prosperity to adversity and its emergence again, like a phoenix, to the flourishing status. But Bernard Shaw never presents a sudden jerk to a country's past. He illustrates the cause and effect working behind the fall of illustrious men. For example, in *Major Barbara* Undershaft makes insignificant

intellectual and moral progress since his ancestor Britannus of Caesar's generation. This sort of sticking to the already set pattern of society produces tragic effects in a Shavian tragi-comedy.

The nation or human race emerges as the real hero in a Shavian tragicomedy. *Caesar and Cleopatra*, *John Bull's Other Island*, *Major Barbara*, *Androcles and the Lion*, *Saint Joan* and *On the Rocks* illustrate Shaw's ideology for the reformation of society. Thus his plays are the outlet of his own ideological commitments. According to him there is only one way of dramatizing an idea and that is by putting on the stage a human being possessed by that idea, yet none the less a human being with all the human impulses which make him real and therefore interesting to us.

The plays like *John Bull's Other Island*, *Heartbreak House* and *On the Rocks* represent Ireland and England with vital role and human protagonists bear a secondary place. *Major Barbara* is not confined to the "tinpot tragedy" of a girl. It deals with the whole system of all mankind. In *Saint Joan* Joan's life and particularly her death indicates not only the liberation of France from England but also the whole medieval world of Catholicism, feudalism, the dawn of Protestantism and nationalism covering five centuries of history up to 1920. In the same way, *Androcles and the Lion* symbolises religious persecution which is as old as humanity itself and as wide as the world of man. Sometimes the protagonist emerges as a redeemer in a Shavian play and brings the antagonist to the realm of reality. This action of the Shavian hero is summed up in the last moment of the play:

Caesar: What! As much a child as ever, Cleopatra! (The Complete Plays 296)

Such other pairs are Caesar and Cleopatra in *Caesar and Cleopatra*, Shotover and Ellie Dunn in *Heartbreak House*, Joan and the Dauphin in *Saint Joan*. The protagonist's half success in taking the antagonist to the expected summit of development creates the tragicomic effect in the play of Bernard Shaw. For example, in *Caesar and Cleopatra* Caesar fails in changing Cleopatra's attitude to life. On the other hand, Joan in *Saint Joan* succeeds in inculcating the qualities and feeling of manhood in Charlie.

Conflict is the moving force in a drama be it comedy or tragedy. In comedy it is most probably for a girl's hand and in a tragedy for power of any sort. Realizing the importance of conflict in a play Shaw writes, "No conflict, no drama." (Prefaces 729) The conflict infused by Shaw bears ground in a man's struggle against social, moral and political institutions. The conflict of wills emerges quite frequently in a Shavian drama. For example, in *Man and Superman* Ann Whitefield declares to Tanner that her role as a mother might cause her death. Plays representing such sort of clash are *Love Among the Artists* with Jack and Magdalen Brailsford, *An Unsocial Socialist* with Sidney Trefusis and Henrietta Jansenius, *Misalliance* with Joey Percival and Hypatia Tarlton, *Pigmalion* with Henry Higgins and Eliza Doolittle and *The Apple Cart* with king Magnus and Orinthia. The conflict of wills between parents and children comes to the forefront through Shaw's own words:

We even get tragedies; for there is nothing so tragic to contemplate or so devastating to suffer as the oppression of will without conscience. (Prefaces 80)

The conflict between the children and parents is less tragic and more farcical in Shaw's plays. It is rather wasteful social system which generates such a conflict. A close study of the nature of dramatic conflict in Shaw's plays reveals only one and single person standing in conflict against all the opponents around him. For example, in *Major Barbara* Undershaft seeks no support from anyone to save Barbara and Cousins from religious illusions. Joan in *Saint Joan* leads a deserted life till the end and Sir Arthur in *On the Rocks* is the only politician to get an outlet from economic crisis.

The conflict in a Shakespearean play is outer as well as inner, the hero remains in doubt regarding his success. Shaw's hero fights incessantly against the odds with positive attitude. On the whole, Shaw's plays represent the conflict at wider scale. He writes in a letter to Hyndman:

The truth is that you are an economic revolutionary on a medieval basis of pure chivalry-Bayard educated by Marx. I am a moral revolutionary interested, not in the class war, but in the struggle

between human vitality and the artificial system of morality, and distinguishing, not between capitalist and proletarian, but between moralist and natural historian. (Henderson 189)

Shakespearean concept of hero-villain conflict, Shaw rejects and deals with what normal men and women, find that they must and will do not the murders committed by criminals but “judicial murders, pious murders” (Prefaces 631)

Bernard Shaw provides for the hero as well as for the villain equal opportunities of defence. It is the audience who are to judge the play from their own point of view. So a bishop as in *Getting Married* can be called to be a diabolonian in this respect. Shaw’s principles would defend a cad like Louis Dobedat in *The Doctor’s Dilemma*. Judges make every possible effort to save Joan’s soul in *Saint Joan*. Shaw admires good qualities of even the worst social enemies like Napoleon in *The Man of Destiny* and Sartorius in *Widowers’ Houses* for their organizational ability, prodigious power of work and ability to rise above the so called morality of our society.

Turning to the status and role of hero we find that Shaw adopts absolutely new concept. The heroes of his novels as well as plays are unique in themselves. The new hero having common features of a man gifted with some extraordinary qualities, is more heroic, more human and more credible than the conventional hero because

...we want credible heroes. The old demand for the incredible, the impossible, the superhuman, which was supplied by bombast inflation and the piling of crimes on catastrophes and factitious raptures on artificial agonies has fallen off ; the demand now is for heroes in whom we can recognise our own humanity and who... are heroic in the true human fashion : that is , touching the summits only at rare moments... condescending with humour and good sense to prosaic once as well as rising to the noble ones.(Mander and Mitchenson 63)

In fact, the personality of a Shavian hero is the junction of traits of a normal human being and those of the mythological beings, the residents of the fairy world who defeat their “enemies, not in a fair fight, but with enchanted sword, super unique horse and magical invulnerability the possession of which, from the vulgar moralistic point of view robs his exploits of any merit whatever.”(Notes 211) The greatness of a Shavian hero gets reflected the moment he appears on the stage. Instances to justify this fact are in *Caesar and Cleopatra* Caesar’s walking into Ptolemy’s court, in *Major Barbara* Undershaft’s entering Lady Britomart’s drawing room and in *Saint Joan* Joan’s meeting with Robert de Baudricourt etc. Moreover, Shaw’s heroes like Milton’s Satan remain engaged in “the fearless pursuit of their own ends and championship of their own faiths contra Mundum.”(Shaw, Our Theatres 17) Despite failures, they keep their efforts in process and ultimately embrace tragic end of their lives.

As a dramatist of modern age, Shaw rejects the Aristotelian concept of pity and fear as the constituent factors of the cathartic effect of emotions like pity and terror and writes:

As to pity and terror, if people’s souls could only be set going right by pity and terror, then the sooner the human race comes to an end the better. You cannot pity unless you have misfortunes to pity. ...I do not want there to be any more pity in the world, because I do not want there to be anything to pity; and I want there to be no more terror because I do not want people to have anything to fear. (Shaw on Theatre 197)

Further, Shaw stands against the convention of the physical death of the protagonist for it provides “time for us to be remanufactured, to come back, as Wordsworth divined, trailing ever brightening clouds of glory. We must all be born again, and yet again and again.”(Prefaces 45) That’s why Shaw presents Saint Joan’s resurrection for making her face defeat two times. Bernard Shaw opposes the modern defective system of society. He appeals and exhorts us through his tragicomedies for the reconstruction of the society. Tragic current always flows through all the Shavian plays. This fact takes Shavian tragicomedy in the line of Ibsenite tragicomedies like *The Wild Duck*. Both Shaw and Ibsen represent the ordinary man as helpless in his fight against the harsh reality. To console the ordinary man Shaw, like Ibsen, offers the idealistic thoughts and moral

principles. The modern bent towards tragicomedy in place of pure tragedy or pure comedy is the outcome of the natural human inclination towards a comprehensive relish of life.

Obviously, the environmental factors and forces widen the horizons of an artist's attitude towards art so fruitfully that art becomes a little more scientific and a little more utility oriented with a view to life as it is. Bernard Shaw feels the pulse of the time and finds the theatre to be most effective medium for establishing his ideological commitments. He prefers to present for the audience the story of their own life and presents it on the stage in the light of the actual life circumstances without as little addition or distortion as possible. It is this rationality towards life that makes him present life as neither just comedy nor just tragedy but often enough both together.

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