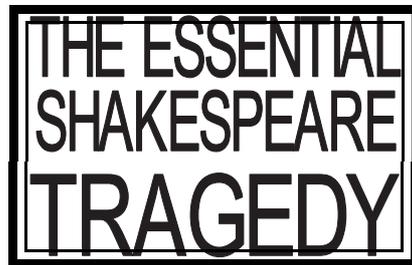


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## WHAT IS TRAGEDY?

To consider such a question would be the most obvious starting point for this study. Unfortunately, it is not a question which can be fully answered. Tragedy means anything that does not end happily, and therefore classifies some of Shakespeare's plays with certain episodes of soap operas. Attempts have been made to overcome this, canonising particular works of drama, literature and art as 'high' tragedy. Despite an explicit elitism, this is no solution.

Problems arise as to which of Shakespeare's plays can be classified as tragedy. The Merchant Of Venice has been classed as both tragedy and comedy at different times. What often occurs is that certain plays which do not strictly adhere to a tragic pattern are classed as 'tragi-comedies' or 'problem plays'. This is often used as a means to dismiss the plays which critics feel do not have the same importance as the 'great' tragedies of Shakespeare.

Here, we will attempt to highlight the main aspects of tragedy in relation to what is commonly known as Shakespeare's four great tragedies:

- ⌘ Macbeth,
- ⌘ Hamlet,
- ⌘ King Lear,
- ⌘ Othello.

The study of tragedy will not be confined to these plays, as others will be referred to.

## DEFINING TRAGEDY

We will begin by considering the famous definition of tragedy from the 14th century, Geoffery Chaucer's The Canterbury Tales. The following extract is from the monk's tale:

*Tragedie is to seyn a certeyn storie  
As olde bokes maken us memurie  
of him that stood in great prosperitie  
And is y - fallen out of high degree  
Into miserie, and endeth wrecchedly.*

Here tragedy is linked to a man of great prosperity falling into a state of misery, an approach to tragedy defined as a 'mirror of fortune'. The drama acts as a warning to the spectators against the powers of fortune, and the ease with which one can fall from high degree. It is aligned with moral philosophy: any relaxing of morality or virtuousness will result in a wretched end.

The mirror of fortune thus shows just deserts, some person or persons getting their comeupance. In medieval England, such an approach to tragedy supports a divine order world view, where God would reward virtue and punish vice. Though an immoral person may rise high in the world, because of the divine order of the universe, and the omnipotence of God, they would be punished. This is used as an exempla of moral teaching to the audience, a demonstration of the punishment of sin.

## ARISTOTLE'S ANALYSIS OF TRAGEDY

The idea of moral teaching through exempla dates back to the Ancient Greeks. Many of the concepts we still use for analysing tragedy originate with Aristotle's work "The Poetics". Aristotle divided drama into six key factors:

- ⌘ Plot,
- ⌘ Character,
- ⌘ Diction,
- ⌘ Thought,
- ⌘ Spectacle,
- ⌘ Song.

Apart from the last, these remain as the key factors of drama today.

## THE HERO AND THE FATAL FLAW

In chapter XIII of The Poetics, Aristotle considers the Harmartia, or fatal flaw, a characteristic of the tragic hero. His consideration of tragedy is similar to the description in the extract from Chaucer: the fall of the hero from high status. What the quote from Chaucer leaves out is the reason for this fall. However, Aristotle's analysis shows how the reason for the fall from high status is not particularly due to any form of order (though this is indeed a factor) but due to the harmartia, the fatal flaw. The tragic hero, somebody who must not be too sinful, or too virtuous, possesses a personality trait internal to them, which gives plausibility to the tragedy. The trait may be ambition, pride, anger, jealousy, or even indecision.

The demonstration of the fatal flaw is similar to the idea of moral guidelines, or teaching by exempla. Tragedy, demonstrating its cause, serves as warning against it.

## KATHARSIS

Staying with Aristotle, we will now move from considering the cause to considering the effect. This is produced in the spectator, the audience who witnesses the tragedy, and Aristotle firmly emphasised the public experience of tragedy. Tragedy was action which produces response. In Chapter VI of *The Poetics*, Aristotle discusses his concept of katharsis, the production of feelings of pity and fear, in order to effect their emotional release. It functions as a safety valve, in that any such pent up feelings would be given a rational and safe object of focus in witnessing a tragedy. Thus the purging of these emotions prevents their crossing over into aspects of private and public life.

Katharsis is also related to the public aspect of drama. The intensity of the feelings of pity and fear are due to a person's shared experience with the rest of the audience. We still have many public ceremonies which are more powerful because they are shared experiences, such as weddings or funerals. Aristotle believed the sharing of emotional katharsis also strengthened the public sense of unity.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF UNITY

Unity meant more than the relationship of the people watching a play, and was seen as important for the play itself. Aristotle's views on drama contribute much toward the classical tradition of criticism and interpretation and according to him, unity was crucial in relation to time, place and action. The Greek tragedies, upon which Aristotle based his interpretation, were composed of five distinct acts or episodes. To generate the unity in drama: the time scheme was restricted to a maximum of one 24 hour period, and the action took place in one setting. This was considered to be fundamental to a classical view of dramatic unity.

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The major theme of Macbeth is ambition. To appreciate this better we must look at the period in which Shakespeare wrote the play, to see what people thought about ambition. To do this, we shall focus on the feudal system and the idea of divine right.

Macbeth was written in the reign of James I, a period which saw the last remains of a feudal hierarchy in England. The system gave the most power to those who owned the most land, and as land was inherited, people were born into the system. What prevented the social movement of the people was strict feudal hierarchy. The King was at the top of this structure.

## DIVINE RIGHT

The ideology which reinforced the feudal hierarchy was the belief in rule by Divine Right. The reformation in England at the beginning of the sixteenth century saw religion localised. The focus of religious law moved from Rome, the centre of Catholicism, to England, and the new forms of religion, Majesterial Protestantism and Anglicanism. As a result of this, there was royal supremacy in the church. The King, as Defender of the Faith, was now referred to in religious terminology, strengthening the ancient belief of the King's rule by Divine Right. According to this belief, the King was chosen by God to rule on earth, and was the mortal closest to God. It was not until the eighteenth century that this view began to lose credibility.

## THE MURDER OF DUNCAN

In Macbeth, Duncan is depicted as a '*most sainted king*' (4/3/109). Although he is not seen a great deal, we feel the horror of the king's murder through Macduff's reaction:

*Most sacrilegious murder hath broke ope*

*The Lord's anointed temple, and stole thence*

*The life o' the building (2/3/65 - 67)*

The enormity of the crime which has been committed is highlighted by the imagery, because of the belief in divine rule which Macduff obviously adheres to. Duncan's murder is '*sacrilegious*', which has broken '*the Lord's anointed temple*'. Regicide (murder of a king) is felt so strongly because the King is the one chosen by God to rule. To kill the King is to destroy divine order.

## COMPARISON OF MACBETH WITH RICHARD III

To highlight the problem of ambition in relation to the feudal order, we shall consider Shakespeare's earlier tragedy. It is believed that the fictional Richard III is an inaccurate depiction, but we are studying tragedy, and whilst emphasising the importance of historical context, there will always be a problem with historical accuracy.

From his opening soliloquy, Richard's ambition is apparent, and there is an immediate connection with ambition as something adverse, when Richard states *'I am determined to prove a villain'* (1/1/30). The reason he is a villain is his determination to move up in the world, to become King. To do so, he must kill many people. Thus, ambition is villainous, and ambition, if fulfilled, is violent. This is because it is in opposition to the beliefs arising from the feudalist order, when people were unable to move in this very strict system.

There are many similarities between the two protagonists. Consider their language: Richard III: *'I am in so far in blood that sin will pluck on sin'* (4/2/61 - 62), and Macbeth: *'I am in blood steeped in so far, that, should I wade no more, returning were as tedious as go o'er'* (3/5/136 - 138). Both men display stoical acceptance of the tragedy they have caused, hence the dark paradox: Ambition is an active emotion, and yet, as seen in the tone of the two quotes, when this runs out, a disturbing passivity takes hold of the character.

## EVIDENCE OF MACBETH'S AMBITION

Macbeth demonstrates such feelings early on in the play and the first signs are in the response to the witches' prophecy, when he asks: *'why do I yield to that suggestion whose horrid image doth unfix my hair'* (1/3/134 - 135). His ambition, then, is straight away linked with violence. By the end of the scene, though, Macbeth's attitude appears to have changed: *'If chance will have me King, why, chance my crown me'* (1/3/144). However, it is ambiguous, so while he sounds resolved at some points, we realise deeper thoughts are troubling him. Thoughts of ambition, and the violence which will result, if he acts on them. Macbeth realises this as soon as he hears the news that the Prince of Cumberland is in succession to the throne, when he states: *'Stars, hide your fires; let not light see my black and desires'* (1/5/50 - 51).

## AMBITION AS A CAUSE OF TRAGEDY

Obviously, Macbeth's ambition, and equally importantly, that of Lady Macbeth, ends in tragedy. The epigraph: *'This dead butcher, and his fiend like queen'* (5/9/35) is important, showing that ambition is personified only in Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, the two characters who are hated throughout the play. It would then appear that ambition is portrayed extremely negatively, because it goes against the social order of the age and ends in violence and death. Ambition is portrayed as a dangerous sin.

## EXERCISES

1. How is Duncan depicted in Macbeth? How does this relate to a belief in divine order?
2. Ambition is seen as a commendable trait today. How is it shown in Shakespeare's plays and what does this tell us about that age?

The tragic hero is of vital importance to understanding tragedy. And yet, how are we meant to feel pity for such an obvious anti-hero as Macbeth?

### THE PROBLEM OF PITY

Aristotle set out guidelines for a tragic protagonist. The hero of tragedy must not be a perfectly good man whose downfall is documented, because this will only shock the audience. But he must not be a purely evil man either, as we will feel no pity. Instead, a mid-point between these two extremes should be reached.

With Macbeth, the crimes he commits are so heinous that any pity the audience may feel must be difficult to understand. However, there are many ways in which the dramatist will overcome the shocking behaviour of the tragic-hero, in order to allow the audience to feel some amount of pity. If we remember that katharsis is important to tragedy, then the two crucial factors are fear and pity. It is argued that a tragedy fails if these two emotions are not produced.

### GAINING THE AUDIENCE'S SYMPATHY

The ways in which a character's obvious wickedness is over-shadowed, in order to have this effect, are wide ranging. The dramatist may give the tragic hero admirable characteristics to overshadow the *harmartia* (fatal flaw) which leads to tragedy. This is the case in *Coriolanus*, where the protagonist's pride is juxtaposed with his bravery. In some instances, we see the repentance of a tragic hero, although with Shakespeare, this does not halt the movement towards tragedy. Sometimes the tragic hero has a capacity for dark humour, such as Richard III, who can make us laugh. With such techniques, we find ourselves feeling sympathy for the tragic hero, or even identifying with him. Whether the protagonist is wicked or simply over-proud, there is usually some balance in the presentation to curb any resentment and complete lack of sympathy.

### MACBETH AS A SYMPATHETIC CHARACTER

This is a good example of the audience's feeling pity for the protagonist, almost in spite of themselves. The acts Macbeth commits are pure evil, but by the end of the play, it is wrong to say the audience feels nothing but hatred for him. The way Shakespeare achieves this effect is dependent upon many factors, for example:

Macbeth's prior goodness is established early in the play. He is '*brave Macbeth*' (1/2/16); '*Noble Macbeth*' (1/2/70); '*Bellona's bridegroom*' (1/2/56); full of '*honour*' (1/2/45). When the plot to kill Duncan is underway, we see Macbeth trying to resist, stating; '*We will proceed no further in this business*' (1/7/31).

Despite attempting to resist Lady Macbeth's influence, he murders Duncan. The more evidence we see of her power over Macbeth, the more we hate her and feel pity for him, although whether this interpretation is fair or not is debatable.

What we do witness are Macbeth's intense feelings of guilt. He knows the murder of a king is evil, and once he is '*settled*', resolved to murder, he knows it is a '*terrible deed*' (1/7/80). The argument about Macbeth not being pure evil is supported by the testimony of Hecate, Queen of the witches, who says to them: '*all you have done hath been but for a wayward son ... who, as others do, loves for his own ends, not for you*' (3/5/10 -13). Macbeth, then, is not a true son of darkness.

## MACBETH AS A TRAGIC HERO

Even considering the murders that Macbeth is responsible for, we can see how we are led to feel as much pity for him as possible. Duncan's murder should be the most scandalous, which risks destroying any sympathy early in the play. Yet Duncan is rather an anonymous character, apart from being referred to as a sainted King much later in the play, so the audience doesn't really feel any emotional connection. His murder is off stage, and all we have is Macbeth's testament, which communicates his feelings of guilt, rather than describing the deed (2/2). By contrast, Banquo's murder is on stage, but he is not killed by Macbeth, and again, in the banquet scene (3/4), directly afterwards, what the audience witnesses is Macbeth's insane suffering. Even with Lady Macduff's murder, Macbeth appears to be held as little to blame as possible.

In the final scenes, the shattered man we see cannot but evoke our pity. The technique whereby this is achieved is the language Shakespeare uses; the finest poetry in the play is in Macbeth's monologue. We cannot hate a man who speaks so poignantly: '*She should have died hereafter ...*' (5/5/17 - 28). In the scenes leading up to his death, Macbeth displays great bravery, a shadow of the man the audience never witnessed. He'll '*Fight till from my bones my flesh be hacked*' (5/3/32). In his final words to Macduff, though fully aware that the witches' prophecies of his demise are fulfilled, he '*will not yield, to kiss the ground before young Malcolm's feet*' (5/9/27 - 28). Rather, he dies fighting.

## THE FATAL-FLAW

Rationally, we deplore Macbeth, cannot forgive his acts. Nonetheless, his problems inspire our sympathy. He does not understand the nature of the forces influencing him, nor the witches or Lady Macbeth; never once does he recognise the motives of these characters. Also, it is arguable that he does not fully understand his own character, failing to realise the effect murder will have on him. He is too conditioned to the killing of war to be able to separate this from murder in society. The results of this are intense, and his feelings of guilt, though at times well hidden, are devastating. When we talk about the fatal flaw of Macbeth, we usually consider ambition, and yet, it is his misunderstanding of motive, and his own self, which lead to his bloody downfall.

## EXERCISES

1. How should a tragic hero be presented in drama?
2. Why is Macbeth a problem for the traditional role of a tragic hero, and how is this overcome?

## THE PROBLEMS OF HAMLET

Revenge is one of the oldest forms of Narrative, and very popular in the Elizabethan era, good examples being Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* and Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*. When we talk about Hamlet in relation to the revenge play, we encounter problems because the hero delays taking revenge. The source of the play, *Amleth*, dating back to the 12th century, had no moral problems with revenge. Hamlet, first acted in 1600, had a different context, and therefore differed in relation to the concept of revenge.

Hamlet is notoriously known as a problem play, and typical problems which critics find with the work are the hero's madness, or the reasons why he is sent to England. However, in this study, we shall focus on the problems of revenge, and why Hamlet delays.

The reasons for his delaying the revenge against '*He that hath kill'd my king, and whor'd my mother*' (5/2/64) come under three lines of interpretation:

- ⌘ Firstly, it is believed that Hamlet is not given adequate reasons for his delay, and therefore the play is a failure.
- ⌘ Secondly, critics argue that Hamlet acts as quickly as possible, in the given circumstances.
- ⌘ The third interpretation for Hamlet's procrastination have a psychological basis, focusing on the disgust of a son toward a mother who is acting improperly.

In considering the second reason: that Hamlet acts as quickly as possible in the circumstances, these circumstances will now be explored.

## THE NEED FOR VENGEANCE

Hamlet begins with very strong feelings about seeking revenge after the encounter with the Ghost of his Father, when he learns that the Ghost needs '*the foul crimes done in my days of nature (to be) burnt and purg'd away*' (1/5/12 -13). Hamlet responds to the news that his uncle, now King and married to Hamlet's mother, Claudius, is responsible by saying '*O my prophetic soul, mine Uncle?*' (1/5/41). This is important because it shows that the Ghost is confirming the beliefs which his son had already been considering. The Ghost thus gives impetus to Hamlet's decision to '*Sweep to my revenge*' (1/5/31). Yet he then makes no attempt to revenge his father's murder, nor comes up with any plot. Although we feel the passion of his pronouncements of revenge throughout the next few acts: '*Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, ruthless villain! O vengeance!*' (2/2/77 - 78), Hamlet doesn't actually do anything. Why?

## THE CONCEPT OF REVENGE

In the sixteenth century, this was problematic, being a complex political and religious issue as a result of the reformation of the church in England in the early parts of the century, marking a change from one belief system to another. The old testament of the Christian Bible permitted blood revenge and allowed people to avenge any crime committed against themselves or their family. The Reformation shifted religious focus to the New Testament, where revenge was kept for God alone. In place of it, forgiveness was a crucial focus of Christianity. Thus, to seek revenge would be to sin against the divine knowledge of God. In the period when Hamlet was written, vengeance was a newly created sin.

Where the tension between Old and New Testament accounts of revenge is best felt is in the scene where Hamlet is about to murder Claudius whilst he prays. Hamlet begins: *'Now might I do it'* (3/3/73). Yet, the influence of religion is clear, since Hamlet realises: *'and so he gives to heaven, and so I am revenged'* (3/3/74 - 75). The scene in the Chapel is of vital importance to the understanding of the role of the individual's conscience in a new religious context.

A further point to consider is the concept of Regicide, the moral implications of which are considered at greater length under the Macbeth section (Ambition and context). Claudius, despite the way he gained the title, is the king. To kill the king is a sin.

## THE ROLE OF LAERTES

To shift the focus of revenge, we can see that in many ways, Laertes acts as Hamlet's opposite, especially in relation to revenge. As soon as he receives news of his father's death, he rushes home across continents to return to Elsinore. We are told *'The Ocean... eats not the flats with more impious lustre than young Laertes'* (4/5/99 - 100). When Laertes enters, he swears: *'I'll be reveng'd most thoroughly for my father'* (4/3/135 - 136). The haste with which Laertes seeks revenge, and in part, achieves it, is set against Hamlet's delaying. The contrast is furthered when Laertes tells Claudius he is prepared *'To cut his throat in th' church'* (4/7/125), something which we already know Hamlet was not able to carry out.

## THE COMPLEXITY OF REVENGE

We can now see how difficult an issue revenge is for the individual in the sixteenth century. Either conscience is troubled by the new religious implications of revenge as sin (Hamlet) or an old testament blood revenge ethic is followed (Laertes). Whichever course of action is taken, there is no ultimately correct solution. What is important in this concept of revenge, is the part played by conscience, which will be discussed further in the next chapter.

## EXERCISES

1. How is revenge a complicated issue in reference to the sixteenth century?
2. Given that revenge is a complicated issue, discuss how it is presented in Hamlet, or other of Shakespeare's plays.

### THE PROBLEM OF CONSCIENCE

In discussing the problem of revenge, the issue of conscience seems to be recurring. Some of the reasons which cause Hamlet's delay in avenging his father's death by murdering Claudius are problems of conscience. Revenge, an important religious issue, had been replaced with conscience and forgiveness.

### PUNISHMENT OF WRONGDOING

One problem with tragedy is when the audience does not see vengeance take place because they are not witnessing the just deserts of a tragic protagonist or general wrongdoer. Thus, the idea of tragedy as a mirror of fortune, to be used as an exempla of moral teaching, became a problem. Evil sometimes succeeded, a concept new to Renaissance tragedy. The idea of an unjust world was common to the new form of tragedy, that God would not always punish evildoers. Consider what Lady Macduff says in *Macbeth*: *'I have done no harm. But I remember now I am in this earthly world, where to do harm is often laudable, to do good sometimes accounted dangerous folly'* (4/2/74-77). The world of tragedy is not the straightforward Christian world, with the punishment of sin and the reward of virtue. If so, how could Lady Macduff and her children be murdered?

### INJUSTICE

This is the problem of injustice, a prerequisite for tragedy. Yet it is argued that the guilty can never escape punishment, which is where conscience is important. If we know right from wrong, then we are aware of which of our acts are right, which are wrong. It is argued that in the tragedies, there is happiness only in virtue, a view which is obviously incorrect, since there is a long line of virtuous characters who come to a tragic end: Cordelia, for example. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that there is no true happiness in vice, thus solving the problem of injustice. If the guilty in the tragedies are not shown to be suffering in the body, they more often than not are suffering in their mind. This shift of focus from body to mind is an important factor of Renaissance drama, as we have seen earlier, in Richard III's suffering: *'O coward conscience, how doth thou affront me'* (5/3/179), and that of *Macbeth*.

### HAMLET'S USE OF THE PLAY-WITHIN-THE-PLAY

In *Hamlet*, we can see conscience acting as a warning against hastiness of punishment. With Claudius, we see, briefly, conscience acting as the suffering of guilt. The key scenes for this consideration are the staging of the play-within-the-play, and the scene in the chapel.

Hamlet believes conscience will act as a trap, whereby he can confront Claudius about his crimes. To achieve this, he plans to stage a play re-enacting the murder of his father: *'The play's the thing, wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King'* (2/2/600 - 601). Here, again, we have a return to drama as exempla. Consider what Hamlet says: *'I have heard that guilty creatures sitting at a play have by the very cunning of the scene, been struck to the soul, that presently they have proclaim'd their malefactions'* (2/2/584 - 588). This indeed appears to work, as Hamlet says *'We that have free souls it touches us not'* (3/2/259). His belief that drama produces uncomfortable feelings of conscience in the guilty seems to be true.

### CLAUDIUS

The following scene includes Claudius' soliloquy on guilt: *'My offence is rank, it smells to heaven' (3/3/36)*, so much so that *'Pray can I not, though inclination be as sharp as will' (3/3/38 - 39)*. Claudius considers the possibility of repentance and mercy, believing *'then I'll look up. My fault is past' (3/3/50 -51)*. Yet he realises he still possesses what drove him to the murder of his brother; crown, ambition and Gertrude. Though it is arguable that he does not repent of what he has gained, his sufferings are explicit; *'O wretched state, O bosom black as death' (3/3/67)*. The sufferings of conscience, then, replace the physical suffering of the earlier plays. For a good example of this, see Christopher Marlow's *Dr. Faustus*.

### REVENGE AND CONSCIENCE

The effects of conscience are apparent throughout *Hamlet*. Even Laertes, though so full of vengeance, states just before he poisons Hamlet: *'And yet it is almost against my conscience' (5/2/300)*. What we have, then, in *Hamlet* is a tension between revenge and conscience, and also between ambition and conscience, as depicted by Claudius. As we have seen in the section on Revenge, new religious ethics and morality produced a dilemma in the concept of revenge, a tension which was caused by the sixteenth century's shift of focus towards the mind, and the belief that a strong conscience would either prevent or punish evil. This shift is evident in tragedy, because although injustice and explicit evil are evident, the wrongdoers, from Richard III to Leontes in *The Winter's Tale* suffer in varying degrees as a result of their wrongs.

### EXERCISES

1. How does the mind become a focus of punishment in Renaissance tragedy?
2. Explain the different effects of conscience in relation to one or more of Shakespeare's tragedies.

## THE TRAGEDY OF MADNESS

Madness is common in all Shakespeare's tragedies. Because of this, it is important to consider what role madness plays in the tragic picture, and its significance to the meaning of the play.

Typically in literary criticism, madness is felt to represent just punishment for sin. For Lear, this occurs *'when majesty stoops to folly'* (1/1/148), and his folly takes shape:

- ⌘ In his stubbornness
- ⌘ His anger
- ⌘ The terrible use of his daughters.

So is it fair to say that madness is a form of spiritual suffering?

## EDGAR: THE PRETENCE OF MADNESS

I would like to begin by considering the madness feigned by this character. In his insane ramblings, Edgar does depict the ethic of madness as punishment for sin. He tells us that he has been *'proud in heart and mind'*, *'served the lust of my mistress'* heart *'Swore as many oaths as I spoke words'*. That *'wine loved I deeply, dice dearly'*. Reference is also made to *'sloth'* and *'greediness'* (3/4/84 - 93). The reasons Edgar gives for his madness are similar to the seven deadly sins, a typical example of Christian moral warning. Indeed, the warnings Edgar gives against succumbing to madness reflects this, when he states *'pray, innocent and beware the foul fiend'* (3/6/7 - 8). But Edgar's madness begins this point of debate. Though it is apparent that his madness conforms to the idea of Christian justice, and punishment for sin, it is acted madness. Edgar, in his pretence, displays the common belief toward madness, yet does not experience madness itself.

## LEAR'S MADNESS

This form of madness is different to that which we have considered so far. Many references have been made to the links between religion and tragic drama. And though the religious context is important for a fuller understanding of the drama, we will now begin to consider tragedy, if not in opposite to religion, at least, remote from it. Lear's madness is in excess of any reason for it. His sufferings cannot be justified by religious morality. The Christian notion of suffering led to self knowledge, yet at the end of the play, Lear has not repented, has not achieved a state of purified self knowledge. Though he accepts his wrong towards Cordelia, to call his character at the end of the play repentant, would be excessive.

## NIHILISM

Nihilism is the rejection of all beliefs that would ascribe meaning and order to the world. Lear as a character and King Lear the play have a deep relationship to the concept of nihilism. Obviously then, this is in direct opposite to a Christian world picture. As the fool says to Lear *'thou art nothing'* (1/4/194), at the best *'Lear's shadow'* (1/4/231). Lear's madness is better linked to the idea of nihilism than Christian redemption.

## KING LEAR AND CHRISTIANITY

It is important to note the source of the play, The true chronicle history of King Lear (Anon, c 1594), because in adapting it, Shakespeare edits most of the overt Christianity references, thus it has no such emphasis on a compensatory future life. The opposition to Christianity is extended by a Pagan setting, as noted by reference to the 'Gods', Jupiter, Juno and Apollo. What King Lear considers is, if there are Gods, they are remote, if not openly hostile. For example, Gloucester's comment: *'As flies to wanton boys are we to th' gods; They kill us for their sport'* (4/1/36 - 37). There are no good instances of justice and order, indeed the opposite, considering the death of Cordelia.

What is being understood is that the tragic picture cannot be aligned with the Christian practice, of a personal and benevolent God. Even in some of the more religious tragedies of Shakespeare's (see the section on Hamlet and conscience), there is always a degree of tension towards upholding religious beliefs. If it is a meaningful, ordered world, how could tragedy exist? This is pertinent to the Renaissance, as medieval faith was slowly replaced by a new stoicism, and the questioning of archaic religious foundations, a debate which was allowed under the new climate of religious toleration under Elizabeth I and James I.

## COMING TO AN END

Another concept to consider in our reading of King Lear is entropy, when a system ends through exhaustion, in contrast to the Christian idea of the apocalypse: a great coming to an end where the virtuous are rewarded. King Lear is better compared to the world ending through entropy. This idea begins early, with Gloucester's statement: *'we have seen the best of our time'* (1/2/115). The ending in question may concern the traditional, aristocratic and feudal systems which Gloucester, Lear and Kent represent. They are being replaced by Edmund, Goneril and Regan, a new class of people, who openly speak against tradition (Edmund, beginning at 1 / 2). Yet this system has an entropic end, not apocalyptic. It fades out to nothing. As Gloucester says, *'this great world shall so wear out to naught'* (4/6/134 - 135).

What we have seen in this section is the difficulty in giving religious meaning to tragedy. King Lear is not a Christian play, despite the attempts of many critics to name it so. Lear's madness is meaningless. The play depicts a nihilistic, tragic world where the problems of justice and order are beyond redemption.

## EXERCISES

1. What are the problems in assigning religious meaning to works of tragedy?
2. King Lear depicts a nihilistic, entropic world. Discuss.

King Lear is, quite definitely, a tragedy. Yet much attention has been given to it in relation to the comic genre. Why this is said, and how it applies, are the considerations for this section.

## HUMOUR IN KING LEAR

The play begins with bad jokes in relation to the conception of Gloucester's bastard son, Edmund. During the discussion, when Kent states: *'I cannot conceive you'*, Gloucester replies: *'Sir, this young fellow's mother could'* (1/1/11 - 12) and admits: *'There was good sport at his making'* (1/1/21 - 22). Some good examples to begin this discussion about the 'comedy' of King Lear, because such jokes are in bad taste, jokes Gloucester makes about his own wrong doings. Humour makes people laugh out loud, but this is black humour, and pervades the play.

The first scene has a trivial domestic setting; the relationship between father and daughter was the subject of Shakespeare's late comedies, such as *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*. However, the ridiculous and hyperbolic reaction of the king, Leontes, in the former, for example, led to resolution. In *King Lear*, it does not.

## THE MIXTURE OF GENRES

Mixing genre, in particular tragedy and comedy, was the norm on the Jacobean stage. Although this defied the classical nature of pure tragedy, and an attempt was made to purge comedy from tragedy in the neoclassical Restoration, many examples of comedy are to be found in tragedy.

Examples include:

- ⌘ The porter in *Macbeth*,
- ⌘ The gravediggers in *Hamlet*,
- ⌘ The clown in *Antony and Cleopatra*.

If we consider typical tropes of the comic genre, we begin to see the likeness to *King Lear*:

- ⌘ The double plot structure,
- ⌘ The circumstance of handing over power,
- ⌘ The presence of the fool,
- ⌘ Love affairs dominate comic drama,
- ⌘ Natural setting and disguises were applied.

This list bears a remarkable resemblance to *As You Like It* and, obviously, all these aspects play a part in *King Lear*. Edmund, it seems, recognises the similarity to melodramatic comedy, when, on the entrance of Edgar, he remarks: *'Pa! He comes, like the catastrophe of the old comedy'* (1/2/137). In comedies, misunderstanding was common enough. Yet, this would be resolved without the body count of *King Lear*. In that the play has a natural setting, Nature is used to exemplify the cruelty of the world, and the scene on the heath is actually one of the greatest anti-pastorals ever.

The presence of the Fool, dominating the middle scenes, extends the comic element. He is full of song, jokes, and general absurdities *'Twas her brother that, in pure kindness to his horse, buttered his hay'* (2/4/121 - 122), but does not function as does the porter in Macbeth. He does not give comic relief, but rather twists the knife in the wound because he is a constant reminder to Lear of his predicament: *'Thou should'st not have been old till thou hadst been wise'* (1/5/42 - 43).

## CRUEL JOKES

What is evident, then, is the cruelty of the humour of King Lear, something which was as popular in Elizabethan times as it is today. The plucking of beards in the play serves as an example, as Gloucester reflects when he considers *'flies to wanton boys'...* who *'kill ... for their sport'* (4/1/36 - 37). The humour is at the same level as the enjoyment some boys have in killing flies. It is similar to the way we feel when witnessing Edmund dupe Gloucester (1/2) into believing that Edgar is plotting against his life. Then there is the humour of sarcasm, which Lear readily applies when addressing his own child: *'Dear daughter, I confess that I am old; age is unnecessary; on my knees I beg that you'll vouchsafe me raiment, bed and food!'* (2/4/150 - 152).

## BLACK COMEDY

The comedy of King Lear is that of the absurd or grotesque. It is black humour, not light comedy. Black comedy pervades the mock trial scene, set up by Lear, in his madness. What could be called the climax to this absurd, dark humour is Gloucester's planned suicide, when he wants to throw himself off the cliffs of Dover in a spectacular suicide attempt. His speech is full of suffering, *'O you mighty Gods! This world I do renounce, and in your sights shake patiently my great affliction of'* (4/6/34 - 36). What occurs is not death, filled with pathos, but a sick joke: a blind man falls flat on his face. The grotesque humour is extended by the encounter between Lear and Gloucester, when the king in his madness, makes terrible puns. When asked if he remembers Gloucester, now sightless, Lear replies *'I remember thine eyes well enough'* (4/6/136).

*'The worst returns to laughter'* (4/1/6) says Edgar. What we see in King Lear is the way that the worst instances of suffering still have a dark link to humour. Why is this so? Possibly, the subversion of typically comic circumstances extends the pain of suffering that many of the character must endure.

## EXERCISES

1. In what ways does tragedy use comedy, and why?
2. How does the use of comedy affect the audience of King Lear?

## THE PROBLEMS OF LOVE

The tragedies of love are some of the most popular of Shakespeare's plays. What we shall attempt to do in this section is to consider: what is the dramatic potentiality in love for tragedy?

If we begin by taking brief points from Shakespeare's other love tragedies, we can use these to highlight situations in Othello. What love represents in these plays is problems. In Antony and Cleopatra, Antony is called '*A strumpet's fool*' (1/1/15) because the love he feels has eclipsed his ambition. Instead of the Roman warrior, we have a man of luxury, and that causes the problem because luxury is a vice and vice is a sin. This play represents love and the problem of vice.

## PASSION AND PARADOX

We can now consider Troilus and Cressida, where the hero says '*I tell thee I am mad in Cressida's love*' (1/1/53). The madness which Troilus feels is a problem caused by passion, because love is an extreme emotion, comparable only to other extreme emotions, such as madness, anger or hate. Thus, if something occurs which abuses someone's feelings of love, a transaction to another extreme state of emotion is not uncommon. What often occurs in these tragedies of love, is the linking of passion with death: for example in the chorus of Romeo and Juliet, the prologue to '*the fearful passage of their death - marked love*' (prologue/9). How should death and love be associated? It's a paradox, two opposites coexisting, which is apparent in much of the language of lovers in tragedy, as in Romeo's '*O brawling love, O loving hate*' (1/1/). Paradox causes tension between two opposites, and that inevitably leads to tragedy.

## THE PROBLEM OF IDEALISM

Othello and Desdemona represent the essentialised man and woman to each other, As he says '*She lov'd me for the dangers I had pass'd and I lov'd her that she did pity them*' (1/3/167 - 168). Idealism causes a problem in the way that it creates tension between the ideal and the real. This 'real' need not even be actual, since Iago degrades the 'ideal' by lies. Yet these lies are believed, and the tragedy occurs when idealism shatters.

We have an unusual set up of plot in the first part of Othello, which seems to be a potential lovers' tragedy in one act. We see Brabantio, who represents the wrath of disapproving parents. '*O treason of the blood. Fathers, from hence trust not your daughters' minds*' (1/1/169 - 170). Now, the possibility is that Brabantio will separate Desdemona and Othello, and his revenge may take many forms. This would simply reaffirm the idealistic love between Desdemona and Othello. From the beginning of Act Two, this is what is put to the test.

## THE PROBLEM OF PASSION

As mentioned, in a love tragedy, passion presents a problem. We realise early on that Othello is an impassioned character: *'Now by heaven, my blood begins my safer guides to rule, And passion (having my best judgement collid) Assays to lead the way'* (2/2/195 - 198). His passion represents a capacity for love, as well as a capacity for violence. We have forebodings about the mixing of these two categories, which should be distinct, when Othello says *'I do love thee, and when I love thee not, Chaos is come again'* (3/3/92 - 93). What could be more chaotic than the combination of love and violence, when they should be distinctly separate? On the awakening of his jealousy, he threatens: *'I'll tear her all to pieces'* (3/3/438).

## VIOLENT EMOTIONS

The combining of opposites, such as love and violence, love and death (all tantamount to love and hate), represents the problem of paradox, discussed earlier. Not only common in love tragedies, it also seems to be linked to the problem of passion, when it is so immense that it cannot separate between two opposites. Consider the divide of opinion Othello represents in a brief instances of time, when he states: *'A fine woman, a fair woman, a sweet woman'*, to which Iago says *'Nay, you must forget that,'* and Othello replies: *'Ay, let her rot and perish, and be damn'd tonight, for she shall not live'* (4/1/174 - 178). It is apparent that the two opposite opinions coexist in Othello's mind, creating a tension so unbearable that it leads to death.

The problems considered in love tragedies can be summarised in one word: excess. The passion is too much. The paradoxes are hyperbolic. Othello comments about himself *'of one that lov'd not wisely, but too well'* (5/2/345). He loved excessively, passionately, violently. The problem was too much, and ended in great tragedy.

## EXERCISES

1. What are the problems common to love tragedies?
2. How are the problems of love tragedies represented in Othello.

In reading Othello, we are immediately aware of the importance to the tragic procedure of one character: Iago. It is through his influence that tragedy occurs, which is important when considering tragedy. No longer does tragedy occur because of the tragic hero, fatal flaw, or its divine punishment. Now, disaster is brought about by one of the characters. The tragic influence is also apparent in Macbeth, with both Lady Macbeth and the witches acting as a catalyst for Macbeth's ambition. However, the best example of tragedy induced by a character in Shakespeare's plays is Iago.

### IAGO

In the very first scene, Iago discusses his motives. His bitterness and hatred of Cassio's promotion would serve as motive enough, but it is a reason which appears and disappears throughout the play. Other motives mentioned:

- ⌘ His 'love' of Desdemona,
- ⌘ His 'hatred' of Othello.

Iago is the opposite of Hamlet, in that he seeks reasons for the actions he takes, whereas Hamlet has plenty of good reasons, but takes no action.

What is most important in considering Iago's character is the immense skill he has in acting the part of the righteous, honest Ancient of Othello. The dark dramatic irony of Othello's commentary support this: '*A man he is of honesty and trust*' (1/3/284). Othello's belief in the integrity of Iago continues right until the end, commenting in Act V: '*O brave Iago, honest and just, that hast such noble sense of thy friend's wrong*' (5/1/31 - 32). Othello has been well and truly duped by Iago.

### IAGO: POWER

The ability to trick people flatters Iago's sense of self and he feels superior to those he fools. It gives him the sense of power which is one of the most motivational forces for his actions. Sadism gives him proof of his power, so, in order to feel better than others, he plots against them. His sense of superiority needs satisfying; as he says '*And nothing can, or shall content my soul till I am even'd with him*' (2/1/293 - 294). To satisfy his sense of superiority takes many forms, and as well as tricking people, he takes great pleasure in difficult tasks. '*With as little a web as this, will I ensnare as great a fly as Cassio*' (2/1/168 - 169). He realises he has little to make a plausible plan, but clearly takes pride in it. The utter destruction he causes is the ultimate proof of the completion of the difficult tasks which flatter his sense of superiority. In his closing words, Lodovico makes this comment to Iago: '*Look on the tragic lodging of this bed. This is thy work*' (5/2/364 - 365). We can't help but think that at this point Iago is feeling proud of his actions.

### IAGO: DESTRUCTIVENESS

Iago's aim is the destruction of virtue. He feels intellectually superior to those who place a value on their virtues and mocks them. When Iago first concocts his plot, it is in these words: *'whiles this honest fool plies Desdemona ...and she for him, pleads strongly to the Moor, I'll pour ... pestilence into his ear'* (2/2/344 - 347). He calls Cassio an *'honest fool'* because of the contempt he feels for virtue. His belief that virtue is foolish leads him to attempt to use virtue as a trap, saying of Desdemona *'So will I turn her virtue into pitch, And out of her own goodness make the net that shall enmesh them all'* (2/2/351 - 353). Virtue and goodness are the things which Iago believes will advance the tragic process under his direction.

### THE FATAL FLAW

Thus we can say that Iago is the tragic influence in Othello. What we witness is the unleashing of the harmartia, or the fatal flaw as a result of Othello listening to Iago, who acts as a catalyst for the former's jealousy. If it were not for Iago, perhaps the jealousy would never have surfaced. What is apparent, is that although Othello appears brave and virtuous at the start, Iago's tragic influence develops the fatal flaw in Othello which leads to jealousy, murder and suicide. When Othello suffers a fit, Iago comments *'Work on, my medicine works. Thus credulous fools are caught, and many worthy, and chaste dames, even thus, (all guiltless) meet reproach'* (4/1/44 - 47). This summarises Iago's distaste for honesty and his belief in the foolishness of virtue.

### IAGO'S TRIUMPH

Classical tragedy functioned either because of a hero's fatal flaw or God's just revenge. What Iago represents is important because what we have in Othello represents a change of focus. Now, the villain, a mere mortal, through his actions, can create tragedy on such a scale and it becomes apparent is that virtue is not enough to stand up to Iago's tragic influence. We have Desdemona's Christian rhetoric against his cynical asides, but it is she who dies, exactly as he instructed. Iago represents the new power over destiny, now that divine influence is believed less and less, and the tragedy which accompanies its corruption.

### EXERCISE

1. The tragic influence in drama is very apparent in Shakespeare's plays. What forms does this take?
2. Discuss Iago's motives and to what extent he succeeded in fulfilling them.