

'King Lear': The Exposition of not only the Tragedy of Lear but also The Tragedy of Human Life

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ABSTRACT

William Shakespeare is an immortal dramatist of the English Literature. His tragedies 'Hamlet', 'Othello', 'King Lear' and 'Macbeth' are the greatest gifts to mankind. According to A.C. Bradley 'King Lear' is the greatest achievement of Shakespeare. Indeed, next to 'Hamlet', 'King Lear' ranks among his best tragic plays. It is the story of suffering and it deals with the theme of filial ingratitude.

Key Words: *Tragedy of Lear, character is destiny, tale of suffering, internal as well as external conflict, the ultimate doom of hero.*

Introduction:

Shakespearean tragedy is "Pre-eminently the story of one person". It is only in the lovetragedies "Romeo and Juliet" and in "Antony and Cleopatra", the heroine is as much centre of the action as the hero. The Shakespearean tragic heroes are all conspicuous persons who suffers greatly. King Lear goes mad and raves. He feels filial ingratitude from his daughters. In the words of Bradley...

"Shakespearean tragedy is a tale of suffering ending in the death of tragic hero".

The two important characters in the tragedy of 'King Lear' who embody this principal are King Lear and his youngest daughter Cordelia illustrates the gloomy spirit of the tragedy fully, King Lear only in part. Both these characters are great and noble. Though the king may appear proud and capricious in the beginning, he is not so in the end.

Influence of Greek Plays:

The Greek dramatists have represented gods as hard, cruel, pitiless, and relentless. The heroes in the Greek tragedies as of Aeschylus and Euripides are noble and good. They are more divinely than the gods are. The gods are jealous. They cannot bear the idea that man on earth should seek revelry with them in greatness. Hence, they are inflicting severe pain upon these characters. As such, the characters in Greek tragedies always suffer. The end of all their suffering is death. They prepared to meet their death but they are not willing to give up their goodness and noble nature. They thus suffer because of their good nature. The Greek dramatists thought that such a view of man and god is necessary for the moral faith of man. They thought that though the hero has suffered a physical death yet spiritually he is very great. The moral that was sought to be given through these tragedies was that man should be afraid of gods and conscious of their anger.

Tragedy of Lear:

The unhappy monarch Lear more than eighty years old, possessed a strong body. He was capable of studying with any terrors. Nevertheless, with a stout frame, he had a highly temper. He once thought to divide his kingdom to his three daughters to relieve himself from the burden of kingship. His whimsical nature led him to feel that now he had grown old. It is also seems strange that he asks his daughters to express their love for him so he may divide according to the basis of their love for him. In his utterances and judgements, Lear is extremely irritable. He takes a hasty and rash action against Cordelia when she fails to come up to his expectation. To Cordelia's reply, he warns her that...

"Nothing,
Will come to nothing".

He passes the order of banishment upon Kent; it is also a hasty judgment. In a rage and anger, Lear leaves Regan's palace. Then he has to face the fury of the nature and its elements with his bare head and without any shelter above him. Thus, under the stress of ingratitude of his own daughters and under the pressure of storm he goes mad. In the state of madness, he says... "No rescue? What? A Prisoner? I am even, The natural fool of fortune. Use me well you shall have reason".

The heroes of Shakespearean tragedy possess some flaw or defect which attains in him a terrible force, A.C. Bradley refers this trait as 'the tragic flaw'. Lear was also not except in them. He loves flattery and always takes hasty judgment. At the end of the play, Lear enters with the dead body of Cordelia. Lear's grief

at this time is indescribable. He has killed the fellow who was hanging Cordelia but he could not save her. The shock of Cordelia's death comes as a fatal blow for Lear and he dies with single utterance.

“Never, never, never, never, never”.

Role of Fate:

In Shakespearean tragedy hero is finally responsible for his suffering and tragic end. That is why “Character is destiny is true of Shakespearean tragedy”. Shakespeare believed that man is architect of his own fate. King Lear loves flattery. Because of his tragic flaw, he suffers endless pain, and dies tragic death. And it was because of fate, Edgar arrived at the prison just too late to save Cordelia's life. In this way fate appears very powerful in ‘King Lear’. It is difficult to give a detailed account of his suffering but only a single quotation will suffice to show the magnitude of his suffering from the beginning of the storm scenes, and cruel treatment meted out to him by his daughters.

“You think I'll weep;

No I'll not weep;

I have full cause of weeping”

Lear suffers continuously. A strong atmosphere of gloom pervades the whole play. Hence Shakespearean tragedy is a story of calamity in which fate leads hero to the death.

Tale of Suffering:

‘King Lear’ is the tale of suffering. King Lear suffers and sometimes suffers undeservedly even. He is, it is true to a great extent, responsible for his own suffering because his judgment was not disciplined and he was deceived in the nature of his two elder daughters. Besides his experiments to shake off the burdens of kingdom while retaining the title of royalty was his own queer idea. The execution of this idea brings in suffering for him. We may believe therefore that Lear's sufferings are of his own making. For the want of judgment in him he himself is responsible and none else. We cannot blame the gods. It was within his own power to check himself from committing such a fatal mistake. His weakness of judgment is exhibited not only in his weak and fanciful ideas but also because he could not decide which of his daughters loves him most and which not. Since he has committed the initial mistake he is responsible for all the mistakes that result from that initial mistake.

Yet his sufferings are greater than his fault. He suffers more than he deserves to suffer for his mistake; and not some of the rest characters in the play are responsible for this undeserved suffering but some happenings and elements in nature itself are also responsible for it.

Tragedy of Human Life:

In every drama, whether it is a comedy or a tragedy, we see a number of beings placed in certain circumstances, and we see, arising from the co-operation of their characters, certain actions. These actions beget others. Moreover, there others beget other again, until these series of inter-connected deeds leads by an apparently inevitable sequence to a catastrophe. The phrase, that with Shakespeare, “Character is Fate” is not an exaggeration; but the statement of great truth we feel, if we carefully read tragedy by Shakespeare that as the story of the hero's suffering moved forward, his calamities and his tragic end inevitably from his personal character. The hero is responsible for his sufferings and not his tragic end and not any outside agency. Shakespeare however, was too great a dramatist and thinker not to allow the element of chance to have a place in his tragedies. It may be recalled an accident that Romeo never got the Friar's message about the potion and that Edgar arrived at the prison just too late to save Cordelia's life. Now, this operation of accident is a fact, and a prominent fact of human life. The dramatist may use accident to make us feel – tragic fact. Shakespeare always held the view that we alone are responsible for our joys and pains is very rarely that he makes his character say anything in support of this; but he builds his stories in such a way as to show it beyond a shadow of doubt. Cassius remarks in ‘Julius Caesar’, “Man is the master of his fate”. Though spoken in a different connection, it is quite true so far as his tragic heroes...Lear, Macbeth and others. Some like Hamlet and Cleopatra have genius, others like Othello, Lear...are built on the grand scale or will attain in them a terrible force; in almost all we observe predisposition in some direction, a total incapacity in certain circumstances of resisting the fate which draws them in this direction. This, it would seem, is for Shakespeare as well as any human being, the fundamental tragic trait.

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