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**Ministry of Finance**



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# **EBS43SW: LITERARY CRITICISM**

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# WHAT IS LITERARY CRITICISM

- Literary criticism is the study, discussion, evaluation, and interpretation of literature. It is the evaluation of literary works.
- It involves a critical evaluation, analyses and interpretation of a literary work to ascertain its relevance in the literary canon.
- Its aim is to enable analysts to either approve, disprove or modify the ideas that are presented in the texts of other individuals (it makes one pass judgement on a work of art or another individual's ideas).

# Approach to Criticism

- Criticisms on a particular text must be done on the basis of a theory or philosophy.
- Aspects of the text that can be the focus of criticism include:
  - Structure
  - Content
  - Context: social, economic or historical
  - How the text manipulates the reader.
- A criticism is an objective exercise which should yield an objective or non-biased judgement.

# The critic and his role in literary criticism

- The focus of literary criticism should be the text, not the author/writer.
- The literary critic is concerned with **what** the writer has said and how well or otherwise he/she has said it.
- A literary critic should know the literary history or tradition to be able to make an informed judgement about a literary work.
- The literary critic can apply their knowledge in other disciplines to make an appropriate judgement.

# Functions of literary criticism

- The primary function of literary criticism is to examine the strength and weaknesses of a text in order to ascertain its worth.
- It enables the critic to analyze, evaluate and interpret a text in order to make judgement.
- It enhances the understanding of a text.

# ARISTOTLE'S POETICS

- (384–322 BC) was a Greek philosopher and polymath during the Classical period in Ancient Greece. In the *Poetics*, Aristotle compares tragedy to such other metrical forms as comedy and epic.
- A tragedy is the imitation of an action that is serious and also, as having magnitude, complete in itself; in appropriate and pleasurable language; in a dramatic rather than narrative form; with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish a catharsis of these emotions.
- ***He proposes six parts of tragedy: plot, character, diction/language, thought, spectacle and song/music***

# PLOT

- According to Aristotle,
- It is the soul and life of drama.
- The plot must have events starting from the beginning to the middle to the end.
- A plot must have 'Three Unities': Unity of action, place and time
  - Unity of action means there should be only one storyline so that the audience do not lose focus (there is nothing like play-within-play in classical tragedies)
  - Unity of place means that the play should take place at one place and not multiple places



# Features of the Plot

- Unity of time can be explained to mean that the play should take place in a single course of time (a play shouldn't begin today and continue next week)
- It is worth noting that these unities are common to classical tragedies and not modern tragedies.
- Types of Plot
  - Simple plot reveals through indicators
  - Complex plot emerges from the story through recognition
- Preferred type is the complex plot

# CHARACTER

- The second most important aspect of tragedy, according to Aristotle
- The character is the agent that acts or puts the plot into action.
- The types of characters in tragedy are unique and different from comedies.
- The tragic hero must be a noble (mostly a King, Queen, Lord, Prince, etc.)
- The tragic hero must have a tragic flaw (hamartia) which may or may not be a weakness. This tragic flaw leads to the catastrophic end of the hero.

# Character to Plot

- Peripeteia (reversal) and anagnorisis (recognition) are two important stages that the tragic hero goes through.
- Reversal from the word 'reverse' occurs when there is a change in fortune of the tragic hero (from good to bad or bad to worst).
- Recognition from the word 'recognize' is a discovery that produces a change from ignorance to knowledge (the character becomes aware of his/her weakness and where it has landed him/her).

# DICTION

- The language of tragedy must be embellished; thus, tragedy does not use everyday language but poetic language that brings out the aesthetics of the performance.

# THOUGHT

- This is the third most important aspect of tragedy, according to Aristotle.
- It is the message or the subject matter of the play.

# SPECTACLE

- The least of the six parts
- It focuses on the visual elements of theatre. Since plays are meant to be performed, they must be pleasing and joy to watch.
- In today's theatre, it is seen through
  - Lighting
  - Costume
  - Colour
  - Stage props

# CHORUS (Song/Music)

- It includes the sound effects and the background music.
- In classical tragedies, the role of the chorus was very important as they not only provided commentary on the play, but also sang odes to praise the tragic heroes and provide background information.
- It contributes to the plot
- It augments the characterization since few characters are used.
- The chorus is a group of elderly men who serve also as the council/eye of the people

# COMEDY

- Aristotle also discusses comedy as a poetic genre.
- It follows a plot pattern
- The focus is to cause laughter and ridicule social elements
- Its characters are of inferior type
- It shows the social stratification
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# ARTHUR MILLER'S TRAGEDY AND THE COMMON MAN

- Arthur Miller (1915-2005), was an American playwright.
- His theory of tragedy heavily criticizes the Aristotelian notion that the tragic hero must be of high birth or a noble.
- The main thrust of Miller's theory of tragedy can be paraphrased as 'the common man can also be at the centre of tragedy'
- He begins his argument by asking that since we are no longer ruled by kings and their royalties of nobilities like Oedipus, Antigone and Creon, does it mean that we can no longer have tragedies?

# The debate

- According to Miller, we do not always need kings and nobles before we can write/stage tragedies because the ‘common man is as appropriate a subject for tragedy in its highest sense as kings were.
- He defines tragedy as “the consequence of a man’s total compulsion to evaluate himself justly.”
- Unlike Aristotle, Miller argues that the tragic flaw of the hero is not necessarily a weakness but ‘an inherent unwillingness to remain passive in the face of what he conceives as a challenge to his dignity’.

# OTHER TRAGEDIES

- **Hegel's theory of Tragedy**
- George W. F. Hegel (1770-1831) was a German philosopher.
- Tragedy arises, when a hero courageously asserts a substantial and just position, but in doing so simultaneously violates a contrary and likewise just position and so falls prey to a one-sidedness that is defined at one and the same time by greatness and by guilt.
- Tragedy is the conflict of two substantive positions, each of which is justified, yet each of which is wrong to the extent that it fails either to recognize the validity of the other position or to grant it its moment of truth; the conflict can be resolved only with the fall of the hero.

# Hegel's theory of Tragedy

- Basically, Hegel's theory consists of three elements :
- (1) **A conflict**
- (2) **A division of the ethical substance so that both sides are justified-** Using *Antigone*, we consider the characters Creon and Antigone.
- (3) **The implied reconciliation-** the resolution of any conflict permits a case to be made for the advent of harmony.

# Shakespearean Tragedy

- Some similarities between Shakespearean tragedies and Classical Greek tragedies are the titles. Both Classical Greek tragedies and Shakespearean tragedies are mostly named after the tragic heroes/heroines (Oedipus, Antigone, Medea, Electra, etc.). Shakespeare's plays (Othello, Julius Cesar, Romeo and Juliet, Macbeth, etc.)
- Most tragic heroes are from dignified backgrounds: princes, war generals, powerful families. Though not all tragic heroes are kingly, most of them are highly placed in the society.

# Shakespearean Tragedy

- All the tragic heroes demonstrate tragic flaws which lead to their catastrophe
- There are however some points of divergences which include:
  - Violation of the unity of place: Most of Shakespearean plays have a change in setting
  - Storylines in Shakespeare are not straightforward
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# LET US ATTEMPT TO DEFINE TRAGEDY

- A change in the fortunes of a character such that the change is from good to bad/worst, rich to poverty, healthy to sickness, noble to ignoble, life to death.
- The change is caused by a misjudgement or miscalculation (not necessarily a weakness in the character).
- The change in fortune causes sympathy among the audience for the character.

# Questions for discussion

- What is the essence of criticism?
- What is the main thrust of Aristotle's *Poetics*?
- Compare Aristotle's views on tragedy and comedy
- Explain the Aristotle's concept of plot
- What informs Aristotle's choice of tragic character?
- Explain why Arthur Miller disagree with Aristotle's choice of tragic character.
- What is your view on the debate between Arthur Miller and Aristotle on the criteria for the tragic character?