Fragments of Tragedy in Postmodern Film

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P U B L I S H I N G

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ABSTRACT

Despite the theories about the "death of tragedy", this study aims to find fragments and reflections of tragedy in postmodern film. Tragedy has changed and evolved with human society and its continuous chain from Ancient Greece to modern times has been broken by postmodernism. However, certain aspects of tragedy have continued to be used by literature and film: in particular, films with themes of chaos, violence, popular culture, paranoia, virtual reality and alienation often use the aspects of tragedy. The focus of the study is on these aspects adopted by postmodern film.

Key words: Tragedy, Postmodern Film, Chaos, Violence, Popular Culture, Alienation

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The main aim of this study was to define "postmodern tragedy" in contemporary cinema. I am using the past tense because a difficult period of research proved the impossibility of such a definition. When someone refers to tragedy in contemporary film, he or she either means the films of known tragedies like Hamlet or exact adaptations of classical and ancient tragedies like Star Wars. What I was looking for was a transformation, a new formulation of tragedy. I was looking for the development of tragedy from Ancient Greek to postmodernism. There are countless sources about ancient and classical tragedies and a considerable number of books about modern tragedy. However, none mentions its "postmodern" version. "Postmodern tragedy" is a missing link. The research was disappointing. What I found were fragments, reflections and impressions of tragedy rather than a new formulation. "Tragic characters" and "tragic instances" do exist in postmodern film and literature, but they are not enough to label a work "tragedy". There are a few obstacles which make this definition impossible. So, first I decided to find and analyse these obstacles to understand the possibility of a new formulation of tragedy. I started with the contemporary use of the word "tragic".

As an adjective, "tragedy" appears so often in the confusion of our own century. When we hear that "a nine-year old boy found a loaded gun in his home and shot his five-year-old brother in the head", we mostly define the situation as "tragic", as well as "sad and heart-breaking". A broken career, a car accident, the destruction of an old house or a broken heart can be placed within the limits of the contemporary use of the word "tragic". When a love story sadly ends with an abandoned wife and children (or a cheated husband), the phrase "how tragic" is used as the most appropriate form for the situation. However, even if the owner of a broken heart feels the pain and ache of love as deeply as Romeo or Juliet, it does not bring his story to the literal level of tragedy. The contemporary use of "tragedy", which is closely connected to sadness, death and pain, has its roots in Schopenhauer's approach that tragedy is the unspeakable pain, the wail of humanity, the triumph of evil, the scornful mastery of

chance, the irretrievable fall of the just and innocent. From one point of view, most tragedies do end with the death or self-sacrifice of the hero, and they do create pain and sadness. But tragedy as a form of drama also depends on many variables like heroism, morality or ethical dilemmas, and does not "necessarily" end with "self-sacrifice". In its simplest terms, "tragedy" can be defined as the obligation to make a choice between two positive moral values, such as the choice of Brutus in Shakespeare's Julius Cæsar, in which he has to make a decision between his love of Rome, and of Cæsar.

As we can see, the contemporary use of the word "tragic" is very different from its classical and ancient forms. We do not think about ethical dilemma, heroism or self-sacrifice when we simply use the word "tragic" about a car accident. "Tragedy" no longer means a form of drama or fiction, but is placed in life itself. Also, with developing technology, newspapers, the Internet and the social media have broadened the field of tragedy. Technology and the daily use of the word "tragic" are reasons for confusion. Tragedy, which was only limited to plays, jumped to the novel in modernism. But it was still easy to find tragedy when it was only limited to literature and theatre. In the postmodern era, any news or article can include tragic instances. Technology and the daily connotations of "tragedy" are major problems in limiting tragedy to literature, theatre or film. Another obstacle is the postmodern genre theory which argues that the genres are mixed, ambiguous and blurry in the postmodern era. Compared to the periods when genres were crystal clear, like tragedy or comedy, postmodernism can combine any genre and create a new structure.

In earlier periods, tragedy as a form of drama was related to certain characteristics. Ancient, Jacobean and modern tragedies have unique characteristics. A classical tragedy like Æschylus's *Prometheus Bound*, presents a traditional hero (Prometheus) who resists the pressure of the Gods (classical tyranny), accomplishes his duty (giving fire and enlightening mankind), and sacrifices himself for a human programme (a universal positive value). The outcome does not surprise the audience, because they already know it. It is not possible to say that a classical character does what he does, just because of an oracle or fate—quite the opposite, in fact: he acts to change the oracle's prediction and to change his destiny even though his destiny is unwavering. The same path is visible for Sophocles's *Antigone*: she revolts against tyranny by burying her dead brother Polynices. However, her revolt does not alter the ending with her suicide. Most heroes or heroines of the classical tragedy are either gods and goddesses or princes and princesses. Psychology, which does not

have any space in classical tragedy, became more important with modern tragedies. The main difference between classical and modern tragedy is that the characters descended from the skies, in some ways resembled human beings, and held the attention of both audience and dramatists (Williams, 1992: 37).

When we enter the domain of postmodernism, we are no longer able to make these analyses and limit the boundaries of tragedy. Postmodern genre theory shows that "tragedy" is no longer a pure genre, and if we want to find it we have to search for it in mixed genres. It is possible to find instances of tragedy in tragic-comedies or sci-fi tragedies, but it is not possible to define "postmodern tragedy". Tragedy's connection to political criticism, changing perceptions of tragedy after the Second World War and the emergence of postmodern ethics are the other obstacles which will be dealt in the following chapters. All these changes fragmented the "whole" structure of tragedy. Tragedy has been fragmented, and certain of its characteristics are used in various works. So I decided to collect these fragments and reflections of tragedy and locate them in postmodernism. In this work you will find the effort of finding and collecting fragments of tragedy in postmodern film, instead of analysing adaptations or remakes of tragedies.

The first chapter is a survey of tragedy from ancient to modern times. The themes of Ancient Greek, Jacobean and modern tragedy are categorized according to their dominant characteristics. Some of the major themes, such as free will, love, honour and self-sacrifice continued to be used in different periods, so they are explained only in one part and not repeated in the others. The categorization is a combination of different classifications taken from different sources. This chapter also looks briefly at philosophical theories of tragedy; morality and the ethics of tragedy are questioned in relation to these theories.

The second chapter defines the area where we will look for the instances of tragedy in postmodern film and literature. The first part of the chapter illustrates the themes and techniques of postmodern literature and film. The major techniques of metafiction, intertextuality, irony, playfulness and multiperspectivism are presented. The second part of the chapter looks at the theories on what happened to tragedy in postmodernism. Some major themes such as chaos, paranoia, violence, virtual reality and popular culture are selected. These themes cover a large part of postmodern literature and film that relate to tragedy.

The third chapter analyses four films; Sam Mendes's *American Beauty* (1999), the Coen Brothers' *Fargo* (1996), Lars Von Trier's *Dogville* (2003), and Mike Leigh's *Naked* (1993), according to their relations to

tragedy. These films reflect the characteristics of postmodern films and use intertextuality, irony and playfulness. They also focus on the similar themes of chaos, violence, popular culture, alienation and family. These films exemplify how tragedy has been adapted to postmodern cinema.

Finally, an integral definition of the "postmodern tragedy" has not yet been theorized. Neither its characteristics nor its way of handling characters have been analysed as closely as classical or modern tragedy. To understand tragedy in the postmodern era, we have to look at the fragments of it. This work can be seen as a discovery of such fragments in postmodern film.

CHAPTER TWO

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

2.1 Introduction

Postmodernism and its eclectic structure include both modernist and traditional approaches. Modernism is basically a rejection of tradition, so the definition of tradition is the prerequisite of defining modern and postmodern tragedy. In order to define tradition, two main sources will be used. One of them is Arthur Miller's *The Spirit of Tragedy,* which is a detailed chronological survey on the development of tragedy. The other one is Raymond Williams's *Modern Tragedy*, which deals with the social and political circumstances, and which resulted in the need for change. The ideology of the period and social circumstances are analysed to locate the plays in a historical context. The historical periods of this chapter only cover major common themes and not a detailed survey of themes organized by writer. So the main goal is to categorize the major themes of the different periods, some of which will later be picked up by tragedy in the postmodern era.

2.2 Ancient Greek

2.2.1 Background

Even though it is not possible to date the birth of tragedy, the writings of Aristotle and the earliest works of Æschylus take us back to fifth century BC Athens. During the sixth century BC, the Greeks were very successful in Mediterranean trade and industry. Mainland Greece gained power through a series of wars at Marathon, Salamis and Platea. At the beginning of the fifth century, Greece reached its golden age, especially with regard to politics and philosophy. Political power was transferred from the landed nobility to a wealthy middle class. At this period, the Greeks started to regard themselves as *free men,* as equal citizens with recognized rights. The *polis,* a republican city-state, was a free, "open society" which protected the rights of its citizens with systems like open voting. With the

rise of democracy, tragedy started to appear. Maybe it is too bold to argue that democracy was the primary condition of the creation of tragedy, but tragedy was definitely a product of growing freedom (Muller, 1968:50-53).

The Greeks had three major tragedic dramatists, and thirty-two of their plays out of some three hundred remain. These writers are Æschylus (*Seven against Thebes, the Oresteia trilogy, Prometheus Bound*), Sophocles (*Antigone, Œdipus the King, and Œdipus at Colonus*) and Euripides (*The Bacchæ, Medea, Electra*). According to Nietzsche, Greek tragedy starts with Æschylus, reaches its golden age with Sophocles, and ends with Euripides. The most detailed and well-written work on these tragedies (from classical times) is Aristotle's *Poetica*, which presents us with a series of analyses and a complete terminology of Greek tragedy (Muller, 1968:58-60). Aristotle's work has become a guide for philosophers and theoreticians who have worked on tragedy in succeeding centuries. Thus, following *Poetica* and Aristotle's terminology can be a satisfactory starting point to conceive the world of tragedy and the tragic sense.

2.2.2 Themes

2.2.2.1 Myth

Before tragedy, the most famous form of poetry was the epic. Homer was like the god of all poets and writers (even though his existence has never been historically proven): almost every poem or play following Homer has references either to his gods or heroes. Legends and tragedies basically use the same myths and characters. The Homeric heroes, like Prometheus, Œdipus, Agamemnon, Aias or Pentheus, or gods like Zeus, Apollo or Athena, reappear in the tragedies of Æschylus, Sopochles and Euripides (Muller, 1968:58-60). The world of the gods is located at the highest point of Mount Olympus, while humans live on the earth, lower than gods. The Olympian gods were mostly Homer's creations. However, Homer is never really regarded as a tragic writer. His *Iliad* and *The Odyssey* were epic masterpieces, and they differ from tragedies in many ways. In both legends and tragedies the gods wield infinite power and determine the destiny of men. Heroes are always aware of this duality of worlds (the worlds of mortals and immortals); they are afraid of the gods and mostly obey their orders.

At this point, the attitude of characters differentiates tragedy from legend. In legends, heroes accept that they have a destiny set by the gods, and fulfilling this destiny, in the most heroic and honourable way, brings

them to the world of immortals. Compared to the complicated ethical dilemma of tragedy, the dilemma of the legend is rather simple, like a choice between being a hero or living a humble life (Rorty, 1992:34). Most of the heroes like Odysseus were fighting for *kleos* (κλέος), the word used for glory and immortality, asking themselves questions during heroic actions like, "which is more important: to die and be remembered as a hero [to live forever, in other words] or to give up and be a regular person?" While Homer's heroes fight for *kleos*, the tragic character resists his fate. Resistance to, and refusal to accept, fate are new themes in literature that appeared with tragedy.

Fatum (destiny, fate) is known as the most common theme in Greek tragedies. Attempting to avoid an oracle is a common motif. By trying to avoid an oracle, the tragic hero honours humanity's free will. When we look at a tragic hero like Prometheus, we see the struggle to survive and fight against fate. Æschylus's *Prometheus Bound* was the first part of a trilogy in which Prometheus, after creating humans from mud, stole fire (knowledge) from Mount Olympus and gave it to humankind, also teaching them the arts of civilization like writing, medicine and science: Prometheus is punished by Zeus because of his betrayal. Prometheus had unlimited knowledge which can save mankind. Prometheus had two options: either to help mankind and be punished by Zeus, or to leave mankind with their unfortunate fate and live as a Titan with gods. He chose to help mankind.

These clear references to freedom or the fight for freedom started to appear with tragedy. The main difference between epic plays and tragedy is this fight, which honours human freedom. *Telos* (τέλος), the goal, the purpose of Odysseus or Agamemnon is to act heroically, accept their fate, and behave accordingly. The protagonist, even knowing that his fate has been written by the gods or an oracle, struggles against his fate, despite knowing that he will be punished for a number of reasons (Rorty, 1992:202).

2.2.2.2 Arrogance

Hubris (arrogance) is the most common reason for divine punishment in Greek tragedy. Examining fifth century Greece it can be seen that *hubris* was a legal term and considered a crime. Its crucial importance in Ancient Greek law could have resulted in its reflection in tragedies. The greatest hubris is to play the role of a god, as a man or a mortal (ibid:183). Agamemnon (of Æschylus's *Oresteia* trilogy) is punished because of the hubris of walking on the fine purple tapestry. Agamemnon acted in a way

that only gods are allowed to do, so he deserved the punishment.

Sophocles's *Antigone* also presents acts of *hubris* which bring both Creon and Antigone to their downfall. A rebel like Prometheus, Antigone does not respect orders and buries her brother, knowing that she is going to be punished. On the other hand, Creon, who plays god and prevents Antigone from burying her brother, has too much pride to notice how far he has taken the matter. Antigone hangs herself, Haemon kills himself, and later Creon's wife also commits suicide. Creon is left alone in pain. *Hubris* results in *nemesis (Νέμεσις-retribution)* which is the inevitable punishment or cosmic payback for acts of hubris (ibid:384).

2.2.2.3 Will

Voluntas[1] (the will) used by Aristotle, was new in Greek drama, given that epic characters were always following the orders of gods according to their fate. *Voluntas* glorifies freedom. Schelling describes this glorification;

> A mortal destined by fate to become a criminal, fight against this fate, and yet horribly punished for the crime, which was work of fate! The reason for this contradiction, what made it bearable, lay deeper than the level at which it has been sought: It lay in the conflict of human freedom with the power of the objective world. In this conflict, the mortal necessarily had to succumb if the power was a superior power—a *fatum*. And yet, since he did not succumb without a fight, he had to be punished for this very defeat. The fact that the criminal, who only succumbed to the superior power of fate, was punished all the same—this was recognition of human freedom, an honour owed to freedom. It was by allowing its hero to fight against the superior power of fate that Greek tragedy honoured human freedom (Szondi, 2002:7).

Resistance is something that we see only in tragedy, not in legends. By

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[1] The will (*voluntas*) was pinpointed as the core of tragedy by Schopenhauer. In *The World as Will and Representation* (1819) Schopenhauer writes that the will as the thing-in-itself is the source of all phenomena. Individuals are destined to serve their will, and what we see in tragedy is the will's diverse manifestations battling against each other or the battle of the will-in-itself. Tragedy, for Schopenhauer, is the self-negation or the self-destruction of the will. As he puts it: 'It is the antagonism of the will with itself which is in tragedy most completely unfolded at the highest grade of its objectivity, and which comes into fearful prominence. This antagonism becomes visible in the suffering of mankind which is produced, in part, by chance and error; and these stand forth as the rulers of the world, personified as fate through their insidiousness, which appears almost like purpose and intention'.

resisting his fate, Prometheus refuses to be a slave and is willing to accept the punishment. It was a great thought: to endure punishment willingly for an *unavoidable crime,* so as to prove one's freedom precisely through the loss of this freedom and perish with a declaration of free will (Szondi, 2002:8).

Voluntas is an important indicator for the tragic character, given that the hero of the epic poem does not make decisions by himself. As Achilles wonders in *The Iliad*:

> Fate is the same for the man who holds back, the same if he fights hard.
> We are all held in a single honour, the brave with the weaklings.
> A man dies if he had done nothing, as one who has done much (1951:318).

For Homer, Achilles's questioning is not a heroic action. Heroes should fight and die (through self-sacrifice if necessary) for *kleos* and should not reason their fate. They should obey the gods and follow the path that will bring them to immortality.

Tragedy arises when man realizes that he deserves a better fate. Tragedy couldn't be written if the only duty of men was to love and serve gods. The tragic spirit is also pessimistic: tragedy arises from human suffering as a result of unfair situations. Mostly, the suffering is not deserved: it can result from good intentions as well as bad, and the innocent may suffer too (Muller, 1968:36). Its pessimism and humanism together result in the question, "To what extent are gods responsible for the actions of individuals?" While legends were honouring traditional values and presenting heroism as a way to immortality, tragic characters were not happy with having heroic actions imposed on them.

2.2.2.4 Self-Sacrifice

Most of the tragedies end with the self-sacrifice of the protagonist. Euripides's *Iphigenia in Aulis* is a tragedy based on a myth which focuses on self-sacrifice. Iphigenia decides to kill herself, declaring that she would rather die heroically than be dragged unwillingly to the altar. She sacrifices herself for the sake of Troy. Sacrifice can either link to salvation or destruction, like Œdipus, who blinds himself after learning his fatal error. Either way, it is directly connected to the responsibility and the acceptance of responsibility by the protagonist.

2.2.3 Character's Trajectory

2.2.3.1 Fatal Error

Prometheus, an immortal, knew that he could lose his immortality because of his *hamartia* (ἁμαρτία),[2] or fatal error. The *hamartia* of Prometheus is his pity towards mankind. Moved by pity, he steals fire from the gods and brings civilization to mankind. His *hamartia* results in *peripeteia* (Περιπέτεια), a plot reversal or change of fortune. Prometheus is a Titan, who becomes a human chained to a rock, because of his fatal error of pitying humanity. According to Aristotle, the cause of *peripiteia* is the *hamartia* of the hero. The *hamartia* is minor but becomes fatal in tragedy, and the amplification of *hamartia* results in the *hamartanein* (missing the mark) of the hero: the effort to achieve a goal just results in the opposite (Rorty, 1992: 179).

2.2.3.2 Recognition

Anagnorisis (used by Aristotle, meaning recognition) refers to the hero's sudden awareness of a real situation. In tragedies, at the moment of clairvoyant insight, *anagnorisis*, the tragic hero suddenly comprehends the web of fate within which he has entangled himself. At the moment of *anagnorisis,* Œdipus faces the fact that his troubles are his own fault. He also takes responsibility for his own punishment, saying that the gods are not responsible for his blindness. The moment that Œdipus becomes aware of his actions is the breaking point of tragedy, and is common in tragedies, which is also called *cæsura* (a complete stop in a line of poetry). Höderlin says that

> …at such moments man forgets himself and the god and turns around like a traitor, naturally in saintly manner. In the utmost form of suffering, namely, there exists nothing but the conditions of time and space. Inside it, man forgets himself because he exists entirely for the moment, the god [forgets himself] because he is nothing but time; and either one is unfaithful, time, because it is reversed categorically at such a moment, no longer fitting beginning and end; man, because at this moment of categorical reversal he has to follow and thus can no longer resemble the beginning in what follows (1988:108).

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[2] *Hamartia,* used by Aristotle to define a fatal or simple mistake by the protagonist which eventually leads him to the final catastrophe.

2.2.3.3 Fall and Katharsis

Ancient Greek tragedies end with the fall of hero. Their fall is mostly the self-sacrifice of the tragic hero. The end is not necessarily death, it can also be self-punishment like Œdipus blinding himself, but it should result in katharsis (κάθαρσις): purging. Aristotle's term *katharsis* refers to emotional cleansing in Greek drama, where the hero reaches a certain level of awareness and reacts. When the hero realizes his fatal error (in Œdipus) or accepts the punishment, (in Prometheus) the character cleans his soul with an action crucial for tragedy. Katharsis mostly comes with self-sacrifice or self-punishment, physically damaging self, sacrificing love or honour or committing suicide (Rorty, 1992:315).

2.2.4 Narrative Structure

Most Greek tragedies follow conventions in their form and scenery. One of these is the use of decorum, where characters have to act in a way that is appropriate to their social status, race, wealth, etc. Another convention is that the action has to be the representation of everyday life. The action has to be placed in one locale in a twenty-four period. Each play has to be didactic, i.e. including an important lesson, and tragedy should never be mixed with comedy. These rules were based on Aristotle's *On the Art of Poetry,* also referred as *the three unities*: the drama should take place in one location only (unity of place); events should unfold in one day (unity of time); and the focus of the play should be narrowed to the main events (unity of action). There is a continuous, linear narrative line that ancient Greek tragedy follows.

2.2.5 Nietzsche and the End of Greek Tragedy

After Sophocles, we arrive at the last phase of ancient Greek tragedy with Euripides. Nietzsche sees Euripides as the murderer of art. "Greek tragedy", wrote Nietzsche, "had a fate different from that of all her older sister arts: she died by suicide—by the hand of Euripides. Hence she died tragically, while they all passed away very calmly and beautifully in ripe old age" (Muller, 1956:125).

During Euripides's time many movements of thought were developing. The movements towards a scientific and more secular perspective of life transferred the emphasis on mysticism and intrigue to rational knowledge. Socrates, whose teachings naturally reject the irrational aspects of life and adopt a more rational mind-set, mostly influenced Euripides. The famous

Socratic aphorism "knowledge is virtue", disregarded the dark and irrational nature of the Greek psyche. With the great rival school of Stoicism, the universe is perceived as perfectly rational and good. Stoics used Nature and God to identify Reason, while excluding metaphysics. Then, drama focused on the visible and the rational. Euripides destroyed the balance between the Dionysian and the Apollonian by eliminating the musical element and diffusing the value of myth and suffering. He introduced the Socratic obsession with ultimate trust in human thought and knowledge into theatre. The removal of Dionysus resulted in the loss of the mystical aspect of art. Drama became more naturalistic in terms of human representation, more reflective of the realities of everyday life (Muller, 1968:103-5).

For Nietzsche, Æschylus and Sophocles were very successful in reconciling the Dionysian and Apollonian psyches in their plays. The balance between them was crucial for tragedy. The Apollonian element of Greek tragedy was responsible for the rational and serene, as were the epics of Homer, while the Dionysian was opening a darker way to the unpredictable and irrational. When we look at the plays of Euripides, we see a return to the Apollonian and Homer's "heroic" (ibid).

Whether or not Euripides was the murderer of Greek tragedy, he clearly marks its end. No Greek tragedies were written (or have not been found, at any rate) after him. The reason could be the lack of historical sources or the change in social circumstances. In either case there is a visible decline in Greek tragedy by the end of the fourth century BC.

2.3. Jacobean

2.3.1 Background

> History has rarely exhibited a more appropriate coincidence than the end of tragedy and the fall of Athens.
> —Herbert J. Muller

The decline of Greek tragedy was closely related to the fall of Athens. Greek cities started to come under the domination of Macedon. The *polis* was still an open society, which maintained the old traditions, but Greeks could no longer demand of citizens what Athens had in its time. So though Greeks were not able to control their destiny, they could still enjoy tragedy, but not enough to produce an inspiring drama form with great ideas. When the Romans started to build their empire, they took over the bulk of Greek culture. Rome produced highly successful dramatists such as Virgil, Horace and Lucretius, but lacked audiences who could appreciate

and inspire the drama. Seneca, who was the most famous of Roman tragedians, wrote his plays for recitation before an invited group, and not for performance. Romans were basically unsuccessful in producing tragedy because they lacked a tragic sense of life. Compared to Greeks, they were unimaginative, insensitive and incurious (Muller, 1968:125-8).

The period between the Roman and Jacobean eras belongs to the medieval poets; medieval tragedy is known as a poetic narrative rather than drama. No real tragedy was written in the middle ages, but myth was still respected. The most glorious of all myths was obviously Jesus Christ's own. Jesus was the main hero figure, and in contrast to ancient Greek heroes, he never challenged God's plan for man. "Christianity trains men", writes Machiavelli, "to endure evils, not to perform great actions" (Muller, 1968:137). Medieval drama grew out of religion, as Greek drama did. However, medieval drama was mostly under the control of the church, and salvation was the incredible myth of it. Medieval man always thought that he was sinful and his business on earth was the salvation of his immortal soul.

The age of the Renaissance, the glorious rebirth of humanism and individualism encouraged immortality and irreligion: "The most evident stimulus of Jacobean tragedy were the tensions of an age of transition and the conflicts between the old faiths and new enthusiasms" (Muller, 1968:138). The great men of the Renaissance such as Leonardo da Vinci proved that men could do anything if they willed it. The Protestant Reformation encouraged rebellion against the central authority of the Pope. "Immortal God," exclaimed Erasmus, "what a world I see dawning" (Muller, 1968:143). Montaigne was the leader in terms of perceiving the limitations and potentialities of the human spirit. "What Montaigne was attacking, however, was the Christian presumption and self-righteousness that had already pitted Catholics against Protestants in atrocious religious wars" (Muller, 1968:147).

Instead of natural philosophy or science, the humanists preferred to look back to antiquity as their source of wisdom. A novel humanistic attitude towards the study of classical culture was introduced in fifteenth century Europe. The Renaissance conception of tragedy was closely related to humanism, and at least in the early stages of its development it was greatly inspired by classical, especially Senecan, examples. An important element of tragedy, *tragic pathos*,[3] emerged from the hero's own character, and not from an unfortunate state of circumstances. Marlowe and Shakespeare put into practice the possibilities of this new concept of tragedy (Muller, 1968:148-9).

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[3] *Tragic pathos* represents an appeal to the audience's emotions.

2.3.2 Themes

2.3.2.1 Fortune

In medieval times, tragedy was simply perceived as a reversal of fortune. The character falls from high to low estate when the Goddess Fortune spins her wheel. *The Monk's Tale* by Chaucer was a series of tragedies about the fall of illustrious historical figures, such as Lucifer, Hercules and Adam. Someone riding the wheel of fortune could suddenly fall from it, and be crushed under it. Boccaccio was also responsible for the medieval concept of tragedy. Religious drama was the best-known form at the beginning of the Elizabethan era: "The writer may not be very religious himself", writes Uzmen, "but his vision is strongly limited by the view that the person may rise at first but will fall and be destroyed if he tries to achieve either power or a selfish satisfaction of his passions" (1988:188). In particular, the wicked ones who are guilty of treachery, envy, pride, carnal desire and various Christian sins are destined to be destroyed. Shakespeare, as an Elizabethan/Jacobean writer, did not believe in this and did not use the wheel of fortune as his main theme; however, he does have characters who are doomed to destruction, especially when they are wicked. "There might be particular sins which led to their fall, and at times these would be examined, in the light of the doctrine of Fortune as the ministering agent of Providence. But behind the particular sins was a more general sin: that of trusting to Fortune in the sense of seeking worldly success at all" (Williams, 2006:19).

2.3.2.2 Horror

Medieval men were living in two worlds: one was the world of God, holy and imperial, and the other was the world of earth, neither holy nor imperial. Spiritually, they were angels, believers, living next to the Creator and waiting for him to free them with their death. As flesh and blood they were fallen creatures, who had to live at the bottom of the universe. Both the angel and the beast, heaven and hell, were within medieval men. "Medieval men were given to a reckless immoderation, violent extremes in piety and blasphemy, asceticism and sensuality, chivalry and atrocity; their lust for life led to a horror of death unparalleled in all history" (Muller, 1968:139). Horror was a symbol of fear of Hell, owing to the thought of mortality. By the end of the fourteenth century the death's head and the skeleton became universal symbols. The ghosts in Shakespeare, or the cemetery scene in *Hamlet*, were representations of this particular medieval fear.

2.3.2.3 Mortality vs. Immortality

Mortality vs. immortality was still an important theme. Humanists preferred to refer to ancient Greek mythology to look for the meaning of immortality, rather than the Bible. *Dr. Faustus* calls Helen of Troy:

> Sweet Helen, make me immortal with a kiss.
> Her lips suck forth my soul: see, where it flies!
> Come, Helen, come, give me my soul again.
> Here will I dwell, for heaven is in these lips,
> And all is dross that is not Helena (1994:52).

Even Marlowe refers to Helen and immortality, though as an atheist he successfully illustrated a scientist's self-questioning about life and his acceptance of death in *Dr. Faustus*. Creating Hell in a poem, completely different to how it is referred to in the Bible, was quite rebellious, given the social circumstances of the period. Dr Faustus summons a devil, Mephistopheles, who serves Lucifer. *Dr. Faustus* remains confident in his damnation. His decisions are clear, much more than Greek heroes who were destined to be destroyed by Greek gods, and much more sentient. *Dr. Faustus* knows that man cannot escape from sins and death is inevitable.

2.3.2.4 Tyranny

Marlowe's plays mostly aim to capture the conscience of kings, to make kings afraid of being tyrants. His plays *Tamburlaine,* about the conqueror Timur, who rises from shepherd to warrior, and *The Jew of Malta*, about a Maltese Jew's barbarous revenge against the city authorities, were grand successes during the Elizabethan era. Marlowe, as a successful figure, also passed on to Shakespeare a drama of magnitude and magnificence (Muller, 1968:156-9).

   Shakespeare's tragedies mostly indicate his concern with political order. The king was the father of the community, in charge of communal welfare. The fate of the hero is connected to the welfare of community, so civil war is the evil against the State (Muller, 1968:165). The heroes of Shakespearean tragedy are always persons of high status, such as kings like *Richard II or III, Henry V, V, or VI or Lear*, leaders like *Anthony, Brutus or Coriolanus*, members of upper-class families like *Romeo* or *Juliet*, or a general of the republic like *Othello*. Compared to the gods and goddesses of ancient Greece, Shakespearean heroes were definitely mortal and questioning "tyranny and mortality" through a series of bodily experiences on earth.

2.3.2.5 Good and Evil

In addition to religious drama, the morality play was the form in which most Englishmen experienced theatre in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Morality plays had theological origins and referred to pedagogical lessons about the consequences of good and evil education, or political lessons about the peculiar virtues of rulers. The techniques of morality dramaturgy, schematic rendering of temptation and conflict and allegorical representation were still quite visible into the seventeenth century (Levin, 1960:142).

As Bradley indicates in his lectures on Shakespearean tragedy, "Montaigne was the first to take a complex view of man in all his concreteness, and to hold it steadily. But Montaigne was seldom intense. His wisdom found little room for the heroic spirit that dares, defies, risks all. It was Shakespeare who most comprehensively embraced, and deeply felt, the contradictions of the Renaissance. His plays began with the exhilarating new sense of the ideal potentialities of man, and then the more acute awareness of his limitations, his capacity for evil" (Levin, 1960: 144). The individual is at the core of Shakespeare's drama; the nature of man and his capacity for good and evil are central to Shakespeare's plays.

2.3.2.6 Revenge

Revenge tragedy,[4] which has its root in Seneca, was quite popular in the Elizabethan and subsequent Jacobean eras. Together with *Hamlet,* Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* (ca 1587), and Thomas Middleton's *The Revenger's Tragedy* (1606) were well known examples, Revenge tragedies characteristically include a secret murder, mostly by a ruler, a ghostly visitation by the murdered victim to the hero, continue with a period of disguise and madness of the hero, and end with a catastrophe, a violent revenge. *Hamlet* presents the characteristics of a revenge tragedy (Muller, 1968:167).

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[4] Revenge tragedy is probably the most inspiring form of tragedy for postmodern dramatists. Many examples of revenge tragedies were deconstructed in the twenty-first century.

2.3.3 Character's Trajectory

2.3.3.1 Ethical Dilemma

The ethical choice was also observable in ancient Greek tragedies, but the power of gods over humans was detrimental to their fate. In the Jacobean era, the ethical choice is directly connected to the character's own responsibility. Ethical decisions of the characters determine their future. Hegel analysed the ethical conflict in tragedy in his *Æsthetics*. According to him, tragedy presents a conflict between two ethical principles, each of which is valid in itself but becomes destructive when asserted to the exclusion of the opposing principle (Szondi, 2002:18).

When a hero courageously asserts a just position, which violates a contrary one, his one-sidedness results in his greatness and guilt. What Hegel calls the "collision of goods", which is the conflict of two positive values, always ends with the destruction of one or the other. So the character, by negating and damaging the equally justified power, is involved in guilt:

> The proper theme of the original type of tragedy is the divine; not, however, the divine as the content of religious consciousness as such, but as it enters the world and individual action. Yet in this actual appearance, the divine does not lose its substantive character, nor does it see itself there as inverted into the opposite of itself. In this form the spiritual substance of willing and accomplishing is ethical ... Now, everything that forces its way into the objective and real world is subject to the principle of particularization; consequently the ethical powers, just like the agents, are differentiated in their content and their individual appearance. Now, if as dramatic poetry requires, these thus differentiated powers are summoned into appearances as active and are realized as the specific aim of a human "pathos" that passes over into action, then their harmony is cancelled and they come on the scene opposed to one another in reciprocal seclusion and isolation. In this event, the individual action will under certain circumstances realize an aim or a character that is one-sidedly isolated in its complete determinacy, and therefore, in the circumstances presupposed, will necessarily rouse against it the opposed "pathos" and, in this way, lead to inevitable conflicts. The original essence of the tragic consists then in fact that within such a collision each of the opposed sides, if taken by itself, has justification; on the other hand, each side can establish the rue and positive content of its own aim and character only by negating and infringing upon the equally justified power of the other. Therefore, each side—in its ethical life, and because of it—is equally involved in *guilt* (Szondi, 2002:19).

While the characters are facing such conflicts, the main questions asked by the reader are: "Which values have come into conflict? And in which ways does the individual embody the conflicting strands of history?" Because the tragic hero has to act for and against good at the same time, the paradoxical nature of the situation brings him to his greatness.

For Hegel, the core structure of tragedy lies in the ethical dilemma and not in its dramatic effect. This collision can only end with the destruction of the hero, making self-sacrifice inevitable. The heroes of Shakespeare are also shown to be not only destructive of the other, but ultimately self-destructive. Brutus, in *Julius Cæsar*, finds himself facing an ethical dilemma. He loves Cæsar, but he also loves Rome: to rescue one of them, the other one should be destroyed. So Brutus chooses to sacrifice Cæsar for the salvation of Rome. Like Brutus, *Othello*, guilty of murder, the killer of Desdemona, knows that he is going to destroy his love:

> My life upon her faith!
> I kissed thee ere
> I killed thee; no way but this,
> Killing myself, to die upon a kiss (2005:294)

And finally, Hamlet reaches the level of ethical consciousness where sacrifice is needed for a hopeful and new Denmark. The evil in Denmark is pure moral evil and has to be destroyed by Hamlet. At the end of the play, Hamlet knows the mystery of human limitations. He accepts his fall with patience:

> ... If it be now, 'tis not to come;
> if it be not to come, it will be now;
> if it be not now, yet it will come: the readiness is all... (Shakespeare, 1996:20).

As mentioned in the play, even for Imperious Cæsar, dead and turned to clay, mortality is inevitable.

2.3.4 Conclusion

Tragedy evolved from the ancient Greek world to the Jacobean age. It changed from honouring heroism in terms of bravery to honour maturity and courage to make an ethical choice. Free will, which emerged in ancient Greek tragedy, and was hidden behind the decisions of gods and fate, eventually became visible and honourable in the Jacobean era. Heroism in the Jacobean world was related to the discovery of the inner-self and humanity's place in nature. Brave heroes of ancient myths with

their weapons were no longer the subjects of tragedians.

2.4 Neo-Classical

2.4.1 Background

The age of Louis XIV (1638-1715) symbolizes a period in western civilization when France took the cultural leadership of Europe and became its strongest power. It is also known as the age of absolute authority and order. During this period France had a popular theatre. However, it did not produce tragedies until Corneille (Muller, 1968:208).

During the time of Corneille, the rationalism of Descartes had a significant impact on philosophy. All writers were looking for objectivity and clarity in their works. The age of Louis XIV created many philosophers like Descartes, Locke, Hobbes and Spinoza, and scientists like Newton, Galileo and Kepler. The church was no longer an obstacle to philosophical movements, and the French were proud of their liberty—different from Italy and Spain which were under the influence of the Pope. Descartes's rationalism had a certain impact on many fields of art. The main theme of seventeenth century French art was the war between passion and reason. Both clergy and philosophers argued that the whole dignity of man is related to thought. So the plays of Corneille and Racine were honouring the dignity of thought while presenting passions as subjects that have to be brought under control (Muller, 1968:209).

With the rise of reason, the human paradox and the conflict between emotions and thoughts became the main theme of tragedy. While focusing on the human paradox, French writers preferred to use the classical ideals of the Romans and Greeks, instead of the English or Spanish. However, French neo-classicism was not an imitation of Greek ideals, it was a novel form developed in response to new needs (Muller, 1968:207-9). Neo-classical drama mostly followed the Stoic approach of the Greeks.

2.4.2 Themes

2.4.2.1 Return of the Hero

The period derives its name from the classical world because of the use of ancient myths in arts and literature. Two important tragedians of the neo-classical world, Corneille and Racine, reused the heroes of Homer and added their own interpretation. Homer's heroes were the main characters and the values of ancient Greece were honoured. However, the stories

were rationalized and changed following the major philosophical movements of the period. So, although the names and myths are used, they were not exact applications of these myths but interpretations of the plays.

2.4.2.2 Honour

Honour again was regarded as the highest value for mankind. Corneille's *Le Cid* illustrated the sacrifice of love during the struggle for honour. First, Don Rodrigo sacrifices the chances of winning Chimene as his wife by killing Don Gomes in order to save his own father's honour. Later, Chimene sacrifices her love by asking the king to kill Rodrigo to save her father's honour. Another character, Doña Urraque (the Infanta), who is in love with Don Rodrigo, also sacrifices her love since her noble family cannot accept her relationship with the lower class Don Rodrigo. So, *Le Cid* is a play about nothing but honour. The characters never choose emotions over reason. Like the Infanta, Chimene also chooses honour over love. Without denying her love for Don Rodrigo, she tries to control her emotions.

> This struggle over my passion is due to my honour, and this terrible duty, whose [imperious] command is slaying me, compels me to exert myself [lit. labour or work] for thy destruction (Corneille, 1986:34).

The characters sometimes criticize actions of honour, like Chimene;

> O [sense of] honour! — merciless to my dearest desires, how many tears and sighs art thou going to cost me? (Corneille, 1986:12)

Yet they neither complain about their fate nor act against honour. The characters in *Le Cid* resemble Homeric heroes, with their passion for fame and honour, but they differ from them in the romantic ideal of duty that can even require the sacrifice of their love or life. Their heroic Will is disciplined by Reason and is performed against Passion.

2.4.2.3 Love

Love was a common theme in the Elizabethan world, given that Shakespeare was the writer of famous tragedies involving love such as *Romeo and Juliet, Much Ado About Nothing* or *Othello.* In neo-classical literature, love became the primary theme of tragedy. All Homeric heroes like Achilles and Agamemnon blossomed as great lovers. Agamemnon and his son Orestes are represented as two lovers, both in love with Cassandra. Racine also portrayed Alexander the Great as someone who is worried