
Shakespeare Tragedy, Comedy and Historical Play

Swarnananda Gamage

Senior Lecturer

Department of English Language Teaching

Buddhist and Pali University of Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka

Abstract. This particular research paper sheds light on common recognizable characteristics of Shakespeare tragedy, comedy and historical play. Shakespeare, the dramatist of all time, brought tragedy and comedy developed by classic Greek dramatists: Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides and Aristophanes to a new level in the Elizabeth period. Within his theatre life which expands for 22 years, he produced ten tragedies, seventeen comedies and ten historic plays, which are staged with diverse modification all over the world, being translated to almost all the languages that are spoken in very nook and corner in the world. Shakespeare whom quoted next to the Bible is undoubtedly a social reality; his tragedy, comedy and historical plays have become the most timeless and placeless plays which touch the hearts of the audiences irrespective of social political and geographical differences. His tragedy showcases the downfall of the hero/heroine of high socio standing due to a tragic flaw, which finally causes the death of the protagonist either by being killed or committing suicide. His comedy is much more different from one another, although almost all of them end in poetic justice. His historical plays are based on the English history from 12th century to 16th century (from 1399 to 1485) and actual kings who ruled Great Britain in the particular period. However, Shakespeare added more dramatic effects into these historical plays constantly reminding the fact that he is not a historian yet a dramatist.

Keywords: tragedy, comedy, historical plays, Shakespeare, Elizabethan period

Introduction

William Shakespeare (1564-1616) is the most quoted next to the Bible and the most quoted artist/dramatist in the literary world. Therefore, Ben Jonson, one of the most prominent contemporaries of Shakespeare remarks that Shakespeare is not only the “soul of the age” but also the “wonder of our age and star of the poets”. In his active theatre life of 22 years he has produced 10 tragedies, 17 comedies and 10 histories, which over the years, have proved to be the most timeless and placeless works of literature ever. Shakespeare’s brilliance lies in the fact that he has been able to touch the hearts of all the social layers of the society, from royalty to working class; as mentioned in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, the rude mechanical’s to kings and furies. In other words, in his time, he succeeded in putting Queen Elizabeth and the poor laboring class of London into the same audience which shares the screwed, witty humor of Shakespeare and *Catharsis*, a feeling spontaneously generated with the mixture of fear and pity.

Although Shakespeare passed away more than 400 years ago, his characters still live and doubtlessly will continue to live irrespective of socio political and cultural differences. His character like Romeo, Juliet, Shylock, Portia, Hamlet, Othello, Macbeth, Lady Macbeth, Falstaff, Cordelia, Richard III etc. have become social realities in almost all the societies in the world. Shakespeare’s tragedy, comedy and histories are the master pieces of drama in the past, present and future, which are referred as guide books for the students all over world. Majority gets to know tragedy, comedy and histories through the works of Shakespeare although he is not the pioneer of them whatsoever. Shakespeare is unmatched in exemplifying human

emotions and human qualities. The way he depicts pure love through Desdemona and Hermia, hatred through Iago and Shylock gullibility through Othello and Miranda, lust for power through Richard III, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth and Jealousy through Oberon and Othello, is unbelievable.

Methodology

It is a library research in which three major types of Shakespearean dramas, tragedy, comedy and historical play are explored in their drastic as well subtle characteristics. It may fall into comparative study as well because the three major categories of Shakespeare plays possess typical, identical variations that make the particular categories extremely unique in the world of theatre. Shakespeare placed his signature in his plays whether it is tragedy, comedy or historical play as the Shakespeare's identity and uniqueness spontaneously emerge from all his plays which are very divergent in their themes and techniques. However, this research paper puts an effort to trace the subtle and unique features of Shakespearean tragedy, comedy and historical play.

Discussion

Historical Plays

Nearly all the historical plays were written early in Shakespeare's career; Henry VIII alone was written after 1600. Despite their early composition and the historical background knowledge that they demand of their audience and readers, five of the ten histories-Richard II, Richard III, Henry IV: Part I, Henry IV: Part II, and Henry V-continue to enjoy popular and critical acclaim as individual plays.

Shakespeare was the first major dramatist to create a cycle of plays based on chronological events significant to the history of his country. In these histories he turned his attention to such royal political crises as rebellion, usurpation, conspiracy, and war, generally showing disorder resolved to order. Since his time only Strindberg has attempted such a series; Strindberg's Swedish historical plays were deliberately and obviously based on Shakespeare's pattern.

Shakespeare probably had no intention of chronicling English monarchical history when he wrote the three parts of Henry VI. Since these appear to be his earliest dramas, his concern undoubtedly lay with developing his craft rather than with ambitious plans. Although these plays contain some brilliant language, in characterization and construction they are relatively simple, their events apparently being strung together without the selectivity and emphasis later manifested. His next play, Richard III, employs its hero to hold the play together, as Marlowe had done less successfully in Tamburlaine the Great (1587). Shakespeare's style in this play, rough with Marlovian vitality, provides an effective consonance with the harsh character of Richard III, "hell's black intelligencer".

King John, a mediocre play by Shakespearean standards, is difficult to place in the chronology of his work. It seems to be an adaption of an earlier effort, possibly a hasty attempt to meet the demands of the company in which Shakespeare had a financial interest. Richard II is equally difficult to place chronologically, but whether written before or after King John, it is constructed so that it combines purity of line with splendor of thematic imagery, a combination as appropriate to the personality of Richard II as is the robust construction of Richard III to its hero.

The trilogy consisting of Henry IV: Part II, and Henry V is generally considered to be Shakespeare's finest historical achievement. It not only fills the chronological gap between Richard II and Henry VI but extends the possibilities of the historical play. In his earlier historical plays, Shakespeare had progressed from mere chronicles of events to a drama

focusing on the character of the particular king; here he was concerned with the nature of monarchy itself. Through his description of the transformation of Prince Hal into Henry V, Shakespeare revealed his concept of those qualities essential in a king without lapsing into humorless didacticism. Equally important is his extension of the “historical” from to include not only royalty and the nobility but the populace as well. Falstaff, in fact, is one of the very few major fictitious characters in any of the histories.

With Henry V Shakespeare completed his historical cycle. The next two years yielded Julius Caesar and Hamlet, and henceforth he devoted himself to tragedies and comedies. His final history, Henry VIII (if, indeed, it is his, in whole or in part), is merely a sequel to the cycle, a coda on the triumph of the Tudors.

Comedies

Although all the plays of Shakespeare that end happily are called “comedies” they are inevitably widely divergent, including rowdy farces, serious romances, and problem satires.

Approximately between 1584 and 1594 Shakespeare wrote his early comedies: The comedy of Errors, The taming of the Shrew, The Two Gentlemen of Verona, and Love’s Labour’s lost. While showing the distinct influence of classical comedy such as that of Plautus in, for example, the relationship between servants and masters and the device of mistaken identity, The Comedy of Errors is nonetheless suffused with romantic love and held together by a sympathetic plot. The Taming of the shrew, realistic and boisterous, similarly employs classical techniques, most obviously the courtship plot. Classical Literature gave the stock comic types of the miser and the wealthy girl courted by a rake, a fop, and a miles gloriosus (“boastful soldier”) the troublemaking slave derives from both the classical parasite and the native medieval Vice.

The Two Gentleman of Verona and Love’s Labour’s Lost are true harbingers of Shakespeare’s approaching comedic maturity. Despite the incredibility of both the situations and the characters in The Two Gentlemen of Verona, in which two friends court the same woman, the play’s dramatic devices and philosophical attitudes presage the great comedies. Love’s Labour’s Lost, in which a king and three courtiers renounce a secluded life of study in order to court a princess and three ladies, is heady with verbal wit and innovation.

The mature romantic comedies belong to the period between 1594 and 1600: A Midsummer Night’s Dream, The Merchant of Venice, Much Ado about Nothing, As You Like It, and Twelfth Night, or What You Will. These Plays constitute a genre that is Shakespeare’s alone. Their plots are characterized by incongruous or unrealistic situations, fantasy, disguises, clowns, and ultimately happy love. Their style is charming and subtle, and their poetry superb. Incarnations of Shakespeare’s humor and rationality, they reflect his observations on human strengths and limitations, and his consciousness of man’s constant vulnerability to his own capriciousness. Their range extends from the fantasy and farce of A Midsummer Night’s Dream to the threshold of tragedy in The Merchant of Venice, whose central figure is the villain Shylock. Between these two is As You like it, a delicate pastoral romance in which cynicism shadow but never seriously menaces the Forest of Arden. Much Ado about Nothing deals with appearance and reality, and the main interest in the play lies in the subplot’s brilliant dialogue and witty repartee, which ultimately leads to love. In Twelfth Night happiness is threatened, but only temporarily, by presumptuousness and indulgence. In The Merry Wives of Windsor, of this period but not of the same quality, Shakespeare turns to middle-class comedy, reviving the Falstaff of Henry IV, not as the master of impertinence but as a fatuous victim, the dupe of two women.

Between 1602 and 1604 Shakespeare produced the problem, or dark, comedies: Measure for measure and All’s Well that Ends Well. Full of ambiguities, concerned with crucial human and social problems, they are more serious than comic. In All’s Well That Ends Well, triumph

comes by way of fraud. In *Measure for Measure* hypocrisy and social corruption are denounced; in both, ethical concepts, if not scorned, are questioned.

During the period from 1608 to 1611 Shakespeare wrote the bittersweet comedies: *Pericles*, *Prince of Tyre*, *The Winter's Tale*, *Cymbeline*, and *The Tempest*. In all four, sadness results in joy and pain in pleasure. *Pericles*, dignified in suffering, stands fast against the ugly *Dionysa* and receives his reward in the loveliness and virtue of *Marina*. Even at his most vicious, *Leontes* in *The Winter's Tale* betrays glimmers of repentance. *Cymbeline* emits a gentle sadness, having the fairy-tale quality of *Pericles* and the pathos of *The Winter's Tale*. *Imogen's* pure and delightful nature makes her one of the Shakespeare's best loved heroines. In the enchanted world of *The Tempest*, despair is transformed to wonder, and reality is inseparable from fantasy.

Tragedies

Eight monumental tragedies were written between 1599 and 1608, the years that also yielded *Twelfth Night* and the problem comedies. *Titus Andronicus* and *Romeo and Juliet* were written before this time. *Titus Andronicus*, though abounding in Senecan horror and sensationalism, reflects the same moral and political concerns that preoccupied Shakespeare in the histories and likewise juxtaposes order and disorder, duty and disloyalty. By the time of *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare had reached his stride, and the ensuing tragedies proved to be the culmination of his combined powers as dramatist and poet.

A lyrical play such as *Romeo and Juliet*, with its sacrificial lovers, had never before been seen on the English stage. Like its predecessors, however, and like Shakespeare's later tragedies, it assigned a prominent role to fatal coincidence. Splendid characterization, beautiful of not always dramatic poetry, and the magnetic story account for its perennial popularity and frequent revival all over the world.

The four major tragedies, about which more has been written than about all the other works combined, are *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, and *Macbeth*. All four command a tremendous sweep and tragic power and explore the mysteries and fascinations of evil: and all are masterpieces of dramatic literature in which tragedy is cosmic as well as personal. The unity of tone in each play is unique to that work; language, with its special rhythms and images, evokes thematic content, each play having its own cadences; philosophical significance emanates from the action. Thus *Hamlet* questions man and society after he learns of his father's murder, and *Lear* utters a bitter social critique only when he himself is an outcast.

Two plays grouped with the tragedies in the folio falling to conform in essence to tragedy as defined in their author's major works are *Troilus and Cressida* and *Timon of Athens*, both on Greek history. The former, lacking the nobility of Shakespeare's other tragedies, presents the Greeks of the Trojan War in such cynically realistic terms that scholars have variously classified the play as "comedy" "satirical tragedy," and "problem play." *Timon of Athens*, owing to its theme and unrelieved expression of hate and cynicism, has likewise failed to qualify as tragedy.

The distinction of Shakespearean tragedy ultimately lies in its intensely dramatic power, its grandeur and universality of theme, and its magnificence of poetry and thematically integrated imagery. Shakespeare's most outstanding achievements, the great plays of human motivation, reflect not only genius as a dramatic writer but his breadth as a human being.

Conclusion

Shakespeare never did categorized his plays as tragedy, comedy and histories, yet the scholars and the critics for their convenience put his 37 plays in to these three major categories. Nevertheless, the classical plays, introduced and popularized by Greek and Roman dramatists were brought to a new level by Shakespeare. It is indeed not Greek or Roman tragedy, comedy

and historical plays the world would know but Shakespeare's as he is the one who touches the hearts of global community which expands from nobility to working class or the lower laboring class. Therefore, he is known to be the dramatist of common man in global context although demised over 400 years ago. The power of his genius lies in his gripping stories which smoothly flow rather dramatically than narrative; some are complex stories which contain more than one plot, as *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Hamlet*, *The Merchant of Venice* and *King Lear*.

Shakespeare is a master in building tension in individual scenes, such as the trial scene in the *Merchant of Venice* and the banquet scene in *Macbeth*, with great dramatic effectiveness. It is not fair to speak of Shakespeare as the world's greatest dramatist as he is known to be a philosopher, a psychologist, or a poet possessed of the artistry that enables him to express his perceptions in dramatic form, and in so rendering them with unique subtlety and communicative power.

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