

FATED EXISTENCE? CALCULATING THE TRAGIC CULMINATIONS OF *OTHELLO* AND *OEDIPUS THE KING*

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ABSTRACT

The tragic trail that both Shakespeare and Sophocles take as fictional playwrights marks a remarkable approach to dramatic writing that leaves no shade of doubt upon their proficiency in this particular field. The Shakespearian option follows a discernible literary trajectory reflective of military nobility juxtaposed with a myopic and gullible stature of simplicity. This, however, projects an extremised Moorish level of racial vulnerability and criticism that yields to manoeuvred deception through diplomatic machinations by the jealous Venetian lot. Sophoclean drama is, in this case, an embodiment of the harsh spells of predestiny taking their toll behind an unconscious conceited politician – from before his birth right up to maturity and his climactic royal demise. In both plays, the dramatic interplay of thematic motivations seem to signal a back-and-forth war between humanity (that is, a human struggle for survival fought against personal flaws) and the phenomenally devastating forces of fate and nature that direct their feet towards heroic ruin. The article takes an interrogative stance, calculating the cause of the interwoven mysteries embedded in both human carnality and celestial forms that advise the heart-rending literary movements adopted by the twin plays as they march inexorably towards the downfall of their respective heroic figures.

Keywords: Hero, Othello, Oedipus the King, fate, flaw, tragedy

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1. INTRODUCTION

Shakespeare and Sophocles are tragedians whose theatrical creations allow readers to perceive the touching horizon of their artistic venture. The setting of the Sophoclean tragedy *Oedipus the King* is rooted in a zealously polytheistic Theban community in which gods with varied ‘super roles’ to play are worshipped to gratify people’s eccentric needs. In Shakespeare’s *Othello*, we are introduced to a spectacular tale of life’s sordid fluctuations. In both texts, the protagonists snatch moments of pride and complacency during which they become instrumental in creating a peaceful environment for the people. It is not until the end that they discover how ill-fated they are, as they helplessly confront social demotion at the overpowering hands of destiny. Thus, the pivot of their tragic phenomena is largely metaphysical, and human efforts and intentions are bound to collapse as the supernatural gods sadistically loom behind humanity, manipulating every scene to suit their own peculiar goals.

2. TRAGEDY: CONCEPTUALIZING THE NOTION

The concept of a tragedy is uniquely ruinous and it basically charts literary storylines that bear heart-rending dialogous verbal exchange. Tragic narratives are characterised by melancholy and bloodshed that result from the major character’s tragic flaw (an unhealing weakness that is intrinsic to a character). Though the characteristics of theatrical tragedies are subjective, and usually fashioned according to the playwright’s own conception of the genre, it can be conceded that their only universal quality is that they all have unhappy endings (Shakespeare’s *Othello* 2012). Following this line of explanation, the EMC Corporation gives its own precise definition in the ensuing manner:

A tragedy is a drama that tells about the downfall of a person of high status. Tragedy tends to be serious. It celebrates the courage and dignity of a tragic hero in the face of inevitable doom (EMC Corporation 2005).

It is sometimes argued that tragedy is about people dying under catastrophic circumstances brought about by their own behaviour which translates into an accident, a disaster, or some other unnamed event. This means that, for a tragedy to take place, the heroic protagonist should take some undesirable actions, be obsessed with some notion or have some other ingrained flaw. However, these are but personal speculations that do not necessarily embrace the whole concept of tragedy.

3. SOPHOCLEAN TRAGEDY: PERSPECTIVES AND MOTIVES

Oedipus the King marks psychoanalysis of Greece’s mythological and ideological complexity in which we view Oedipus being flown to the apex of the monarchical

hierarchy before he is turned into an object of pity and ridicule. As a mighty and revered king upon the Athenian throne, he has the people at heart. He is so patriotic that he cannot help seeing his 'children' being tormented by the fatalistic pestilences of the time, and this explains why he sends Creon to the Delphic Oracle to inquire about the source of the prevailing havoc. In one sense, his ingrained nature of being excessively people-orientated is, in a way, a driving force fuelled by some binding ecstasy sponsored by the same sadistic gods to fulfil the given prophecy. Trapped in a more comparable situation, Fanon, as quoted by Soyinka (1976), sighs out in dejection thus, 'And so it is not I who makes a meaning for myself, but it is the meaning that was already there, pre-existing, waiting for me'. In this sense, the Oedipal tragedy can be viewed as a product of overpowering superhuman forces and his carnal efforts to restore order to the Theban community serve no significant purpose. In any event, there was nothing he could have done to circumvent the tragedy that had – at a pre-natal stage – been craftily programmed to confront him.

Also worth noticing are the painful endeavours of Jocasta and Laius to get rid of Oedipus once they come to know through the Oracle that he will commit the two grievous sins of patricide and incestuous intimacy with his own mother. Such a scenario, according to Freud, is human nature: 'It is the fate of us (men) perhaps to direct our first sexual impulse towards our mother and our first hatred ... against our father' (Chin 2003). It seems likely that it is this very assumption which prompts Oedipus's parents, in desperation, to devise ruthless actions in order to ensure that the boy is destroyed at a tender age as a form of poetic justice. Against this background, Oedipus is brought up elsewhere, as an adopted son, but he comes back fully grown to fulfil the predictions of the Delphic clairvoyant. All his intercessory and heroic achievements are in vain since they serve only to pave his way to the final manifestation of the detestable truth of despondence. Hence, one can plausibly justify the notion that the attendant catastrophe bursts out of the struggle between the super gods as well as from human attempts to escape the insidious forces of their fear. This becomes manifest when Oedipus is finally seen enmeshed in a pessimistic form of disillusionment, too sophisticated for him to disentangle himself from.

4. SHAKESPEARIAN TRAGEDY: PERSPECTIVES AND MOTIVES

In Shakespeare's *Othello*, there is evidently a battle between society's expectations and the individual's zeal to gratify his or her erotic passions. Othello, who is African, defiantly breaks through the matrimonial colour bar and wins Desdemona's hand in marriage. This is against the moral values of Venetian society. A similar case is highlighted by Doris Lessing in *The Grass is Singing* in which Moses, a black fellow, finds himself entangled in a sexual trio by having an affair with Mary, Dick's wife. Both Mary and Desdemona end up being killed by their black lovers, and this serves

as proof that even if man succeeds in acting against societal expectations, society will almost always win the battle. To be specific, Othello's tragic end emanates from his breaching of societal norms governing feminine chastity. Here, society itself is a form of personified supernatural being, battling against Othello's vain attempts to illicitly satiate his sensual desire through marrying Desdemona. Achebe conclusively utters thus, 'No man is greater than the clan. Society, not the individual is the hero' (Zinyemba 1986). More so, the Venetians are a racially divided people. In the midst of predominantly white people we find Othello, as a black person, to be the odd one out. The white hegemonic class appears to be influenced by some kind of social Darwinism and its superiority complex teaches it nothing beyond associating blacks with beasts. Thus Othello is labelled a 'black ram' and his matrimonial union with a white woman does nothing to lessen the effects of the depressing stigma. Instead, it intensifies it through growing hatred, particularly from the jealous prospective suitors who missed out on taking Desdemona's hand in marriage. In a way, he is always constantly reminded, though not directly, that he is odd and inferior. He appears, too, to create his own frontier society in which Desdemona becomes his paradisiacal centre of attention, without whom there is no reason to live since society has rejected him on the basis of his race. Thus, he is fated by having been born black and this is compounded by the racial divide in the society in which he finds himself. In the light of this, all the sarcastic words employed to disparage him serve only to direct his feet towards a predetermined, melancholic end. This is made evident by Iago who, inspired by his racial hatred, mocks and deceives Othello until he takes courage to murder Desdemona in cold blood.

5. ABSENCE OF EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE – DISCERNMENTS UPON THE VENETIAN MOOR AND THE THEBAN KING

The concept of 'emotional intelligence' is rooted in the behavioural exercise of becoming aware of one's own – and other people's – emotional attentiveness or consciousness and then rendering a positive application of those emotions. This occurs in situations where enraged humans become introspective and understand their state, and perhaps strive to tame their emotions before directing them towards constructive purposes. Othello's tragic ruin comes as a result of his personal failure to tame his infuriated emotional world. Despite the misguided tale of literary treachery – the obviously misreported case of his wife's 'infidelity', he still owed both himself and his beloved the integrity of emotional intelligence. This means that he should, as a man of social awareness and fame, have resolved the issue amicably, ironing away all the insidious plotting to achieve a better result. The quality of emotional intelligence is of great value to man of social integrity because it eventually subdues any jealousy or treachery or any manner of communal irrationality intended to disintegrate intact families. Unfortunately, Othello's death is the

catastrophe, the event that resolves the central conflict and makes the tragedy complete (EMC Corporation 2005).

Oedipus suffers the same consequential fate of giving in to his own undoing. His sting of destruction is pride and an overzealousness to uncover local mysteries long embedded and buried in the antiquities of historical Thebes. As a stranger who has just witnessed and savoured the royal taste of kingship, he authoritatively claims dominion over and above everyone and inaugurates himself as a universal father to the Theban Empire. Oedipus confidently addresses his people thus, 'I thought it wrong, my children, to hear the truth from others, messengers. Here I am myself – you all know me, the world knows my fame: I am Oedipus' (Section 1. Lines – 9). This exaggerated level of confidence has the effect of bringing Oedipus a great deal of stress as he realises that he is the very trouble causer he has been hunting for all along. As a result, he cannot regain his emotional composure or his peace of mind and descends into a devastating emotional turmoil that eventually leads to his downfall. This shows that he lacks the kind of heroic emotional intelligence required to outmanoeuvre the external forces of destruction and take a constructive bearing on life. Here, the king is no better than a mere ill-fated female – Jocasta, his mother who became his dramatic wife and who gives in to death after the incestuous incident is unearthed.

6. CONCLUSION

In closing, it must be said that the gloomy results embodied in the two texts are driven by flaws within the characters (Chin 2003). Oedipus' hamartia lies in his excessive desire to unravel the reality behind the cause of trouble in Thebes and, in doing so, he brings to light a dramatic irony and suffers the shock of his life as he unveils that he is the very culprit he has been hunting for. Othello, in a way, is so engrossed in Desdemona's angelic and seducing beauty that he has given himself almost wholly to her. After having murdered her, he goes on to commit suicide. He is in fact a gullible character who never takes time to investigate matters to get to the underlying truth. Thus, we can plausibly conclude that the protagonists in both tragedies have ingrained character flaws which result in their calamitous undoing.

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