

College of Education

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Second Year

Drama

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Aristotle and Christopher Marlow's Reflections on Tragedy

Tragedy, in comparison to epic, comedy, satire, and lyric, occupies a fundamental position in English literature. This does not mean that tragedy is superior to other literary genres; it rather offers more insight to man's nature. It is through pain, suffering and destruction represented by tragedy, that the basis of human character is reflected and thus comes into literature. This is echoed by Northrop Frye who believes that romance, satire, and comedy present dreamy and funny characters whose actions are depicted in a way that suits the requirements of a happy ending. (Frye, 1957, 223) Tragedy, by contrast, is fuelled by the conflicted forces of good and evil and thus offers the reader with the knowledge of how can man orient himself to confront the conflicted forces.

Aristotle, a Greek philosopher, defines tragedy as an "imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds of being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions." (Aristotle, 2010, 89) Aristotle identifies certain main characteristic of tragedy that meet Christopher Marlow's notion of writing the Elizabethan tragedy. Marlow, an Elizabethan playwright, agrees with Aristotle on the seriousness of tragedy. He, furthermore, emphasizes the importance of embellished language; he significantly presents blank verse as a new form of poetic drama that has consistent meter but no formal rhyme scheme. In addition, Marlow's tragedies, *Dr. Faustus* as a case in point, follows the Aristotelian notion concerning dividing the play into acts and scenes that are led by action and dialogue rather than narration. The tragic action in *Dr. Faustus* stimulates the audiences' feelings of pity and fear which leads to the purgation of their souls. Purifying the audience's feelings through pity and fear are identified by Aristotle as Catharsis.

Aristotle and Marlow believe that the cathartic effect upon the soul cannot be fulfilled without a complete action that follows a chronological order of cause and effect. The action, in this sense, must be driven towards a tragic conclusion. Within this context and according to what Aristotle believes, plot is the soul of tragedy. (Aristotle, 2010, 93) Marlow, however,

contradicts Aristotle in his belief that tragedy must be of certain magnitude. While Aristotle believes that the duration of any tragic action must be within twenty-four hours, Marlow believes that the duration of action must not be confined to such limited duration.

Tragic actions in Aristotelian tragedies are led by tragic heroes who belong to high estates, namely gods, kings, and princes. They fall from prosperity to misery through a series of reversals and discoveries as a result of tragic flaw, generally an error caused by human frailty (hamartia). Marlow's tragic heroes, by contrast, are of humble social origins; they have instead certain moral characteristic that distinguishes them from others. Dr. Faustus, as an individual, belongs to a very humble family: "**Now is he born, his parents base of stock, ...**" (Prologue, 11) However, when he goes to Wittenberg, he gets "**the fruitful plot of scholarism**" and shortly he is graced "**with doctor's name**". (Prologue, 16) Dr. Faustus' hamartia, which meets the Aristotelian notion, is embodied in his lust for knowledge and power. In order to fulfill his desire, he sells his soul to devil and thus falls "**to a devilish exercise,**" (Prologue, 22) namely "**magic**" and "**cursed necromancy**". This identifies him as a Renaissance individual who yearns for limitless power and knowledge—a matter that defies all the conventional religious doctrines.

Faustus' tragic flaw of overreached ambition dates back to Greek Mythology which is implicitly referred to in the prologue: "**In heavenly matters of theology;/ Till swoln with cunning, of a self-conciet,/ His waxen wings did mount above his reach,/ And, melting, heavens conspir'd his overthrow;**" (Prologue, 19-22) According to these lines, Faustus' limitless ambition defies the divinity and natural laws imposed by God. This is compared indirectly in the prologue to the Greek myth of Daedalus and his son Icarus. Daedalus made wings for himself and for Icarus to fly from the tower where they were imprisoned by king Minos. Yet, Icarus flew so close to the sun and thus the wax that holds the feathers of the wings melted. He, consequently, fell into the sea and drowned.

Aristotle in his *Poetics* names certain characteristics that the tragic hero must have. Among the characteristics that Marlow applies in his portrayal of Dr. Faustus, his tragic hero, are those of being true to life and consistency. Faustus represents the notion of the Renaissance era in a sense that he wants to rebel against the restriction imposed upon humanity by the religious conventions of his age. He seeks to explore man's place in the world and challenges what it means to be a man, namely a Renaissance man. He speaks of the ultimate vision of the Renaissance's focus on the perfection of the human mind and centrality of human agency when he states he desires to be "resolve[d] of all ambiguities" (7) and be the "great emperor of the world" (15). He remains consistent to this desire till the end of the play. However, Marlow

contradicts Aristotle in the condition that a tragic hero will be good if the purpose is good. Dr. Faustus can never be seen as a good hero. In fact, his personality is marked by Machiavellian ideals which justify any bad means to reach goals.

Aristotle refers to chorus in his reflection on tragedy. The Chorus, according to Aristotle should be regarded one of the actors; it should be an integral part of the whole play and thus share in the action. It could be a voice of community or the voice that comment on the behavior of the characters; it may comment on the role of gods and fills in parts of the action not seen on the stage. It may also give moral and religious lessons. In *Dr. Faustus* the chorus is not one of the characters. It is, in this sense, an Elizabethan chorus rather than Greek. The Chorus in *Dr. Faustus* explains the kind of the play, gives certain information about Faustus's birth and early career, explains actions not acted on the stage, and explains the change in Faustus's behavior.

Cited Works

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