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Analysis of Tragic Heroes

From its origins in Ancient Greek writings and performances, the tragic genre has evolved and found its way into almost every culture. Tragedy brings together people of common experiences with mutual compassion for a tragic hero. A people’s cultural beliefs and practices are well represented by the tragic stories it turns out. Moreover, the collective human conscience is reflected in repeating tragic themes such as death and betrayal. Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, and Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* all follow similar tragic structures despite differing cultural roots and background details. In particular, their respective tragic heroes, Okonkwo, Victor Frankenstein, and Prince Hamlet, undertake a defined process involving a hamartia, peripeteia, and dénouement.

In Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, the protagonist Okonkwo adheres to the defined process of a tragic hero. A key element of the tragic hero is the hamartia or tragic flaw. Aristotle stipulated that the tragic hero should be a model being in their society with the exception of their hamartia, “a wrong action committed in ignorance of its nature, effect, etc., which is the starting point of a causally connected train of events ending in disaster” (“Hamartia”). Okonkwo is a renowned wrestler and well respected in his clan. Though he is not of noble birth as is typical of tragic heroes, Okonkwo has risen from his father’s lowly status to become a prominent figure among his clansmen. Okonkwo is hardworking, masculine, and wealthy, a foil to his lazy and more “feminine” father. The entire clan recognizes Okonkwo’s hardworking nature "Anyone who knew his grim struggle against poverty and misfortune could not say he had been lucky...if ever a man deserved success, that man was Okonkwo" (Achebe 28), yet Okonkwo still feels it is necessary to be as unlike his father as possible in order to escape a fear of being regarded as such, “he was possessed by the fear of his father’s contemptible life and shameful death” (Achebe 21). Okonkwo’s uncompromising masculinity and aggressive nature result from his fear of being a failure, his hamartia. His fear prevents him from understanding his gentle, thoughtful son Nwoye who, try as he may, cannot always meet his father’s standards for excessive masculinity and violence “Nwoye knew that it was right to be masculine and violent, but somehow he still preferred the stories that his mother used to tell” (Achebe 52). Eventually, the two are driven apart by Okonkwo’s failure to accept a son less hot-headed than himself “Living fire begets cold, impotent ash” (Achebe 143).

Peripeteia and dénouement are two archetypical processes undertaken by tragic heroes. Peripeteia is the reversal of fortune that signals the decline of the tragic hero. Usually the result of the tragic hero’s hamartia, peripeteia marks the rising action that culminates with the climax and the hero’s downfall. Dénouement occurs when the tragic hero finally acknowledges their hamartia. Often times the tragic hero realizes their tragic flaw too late and is unable to prevent their impending doom. Dénouement typically renews the readers’ sympathies for the tragic hero. Catharsis is this renewal of sympathy and empathy of the readers towards the tragic hero. Okonkwo experiences his peripeteia when he is exiled. The exile is important because it occurred as a result of events outside of Okonkwo’s control. His punishment results in his loss of title and possessions. In this way, Okonkwo’s peripeteia is directly related to his hamartia, the fear of failure. Exile signifies Okonkwo’s decline because it marks the beginning of misfortunes such as his estrangement from Nwoye and Christian infiltration of the Umuofia. Okonkwo’s dénouement occurs after he kills the District Commissioners messengers and hangs himself. The reader’s sympathies go out to Okonkwo who has lost everything and, hard as he tried to avoid it, realized his fear of failure. After striving so hard to become great in his society, Okonkwo is rejected by both the new and old cultures. Symbolic of all this is Okonkwo’s burial in the Evil Forest, the same place that his father was buried. Okonkwo is almost martyred in the eyes of his clansmen as a symbol of what losing culture can do.

Like Okonkwo, Mary Shelley’s Victor Frankenstein fits the Aristotelian mold for a tragic hero. While Okonkwo worked to achieve high status in his clan, Frankenstein was born into a prosperous family of the rising middle class. Frankenstein’s friends and family cared for and respected Frankenstein, a fact made evident by Henry Clerval nursing Frankenstein back to health. His noble birth and good social standing make Frankenstein a prime candidate for tragedy. However, tragic heroes must also have a tragic flaw, and Frankenstein is no exception. His greatest hamartia may be his selfish nature which generally leads Frankenstein to unintentionally harm those around him. Frankenstein fails to think things through and to understand the consequences of his actions. Such a characteristic leaves his curiosity for science unchecked and is the reason he never reconsidered creating the monster in the first place. Frankenstein only ever seems to realize the horror of his actions in hindsight. While in the process of creating the monster, Frankenstein’s rational vision was blinded by selfish desires for fame, fortune, and power, “A new species would bless me as its creator and source… renew life where death had apparently devoted the body to corruption” (Shelley 40). It is only after the monster is animated that Frankenstein feels disgusted about what he has done, “now that I had finished, the beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart” (Shelley 43). In this way, Frankenstein’s hamartia instigates conflict. Another instance of his hamartia influencing plot events is Frankenstein’s decision to disobey the monster in which Frankenstein, not wanting to be a slave to the monster, destroys the female creation he promised it. His actions incite the wrath of the monster and directly lead to the murder of Henry, a fact that he recognizes as he laments his friend’s death “Have my murderous machinations deprived you also, my dearest Henry, of life? Two I have already destroyed; other victims await their destiny; but you, Clerval, my friend, my benefactor” (Shelley 157). Even after this tragic event, Frankenstein still has not acknowledged his hamartia, and as a result his continued short-sightedness leads to the climatic murder of Elizabeth.

Frankenstein’s peripeteia or reversal of fortune occurs after he animates the monster. Prior to his creation of the monster, Frankenstein was happy at his university and his family was well. When he animates the monster, Frankenstein creates his own nightmare. Everything goes downhill after this point starting with Frankenstein’s illness followed by the deaths of William and Justine and then the subsequent deaths of Henry and Elizabeth. His misfortunes get worse and worse as the monster exacts its revenge on the creator that abandoned it. Frankenstein experiences dénouement after his discussion with the court official about pursuing the monster. Frankenstein, who feels responsible for the deaths of his family members, is redeemed in the eyes of the reader when he gives up his life to chase after the monster and ensure its destruction. By dedicating his life to catching the monster, Frankenstein shows that he has finally conquered his hamartia and is acting selflessly. The fact that Frankenstein does not live to see his mission complete, the destruction of the monster that murdered his family, has a catharsis-like effect on readers and creates further sympathy for Frankenstein.

Prince Hamlet from Shakespeare’s classic, *Hamlet*, follows a tragic structure similar to those of Okonkwo and Frankenstein. The Elizabethan era was a renaissance for tragedy, and Shakespeare’s theatre productions, *Hamlet* among them, were some of its greatest products. The character Prince Hamlet is easily an excellent candidate for a tragic hero. Generally likeable, thoughtful, and of noble birth, Hamlet immediately draws the sympathy of the reader. His hamartia or tragic flaw is his indecisiveness which tends to cause Hamlet to make rash decisions. Hamlet’s hamartia plays a critical role in the events that unfold during his quest to avenge his father’s murder. At one point, Hamlet has an opportunity to kill Claudius who he knows to be guilty but chooses not to:

Now might I do it pat, now he is praying, And now Ile doo't, and so he goes to Heauen, And so am I reueng'd: that would be scann'd, A Villaine killes my Father, and for that I his foule Sonne, do this same Villaine send To heauen (Shakespeare, Hamlet 3.3.2350-2355)

Hamlet bases his decision on a desire for more satisfying revenge though deep in his subconscious he may have been morally undecided about murdering his uncle and bringing himself down into the vile corruption he despises. Hamlet’s indecisiveness also leads him to rash action when he stabs and kills Polonius starting a chain of events that begin to snowball out of his control.

Hamlet’s peripeteia occurs when he decides against killing Claudius as he prays. By allowing Claudius to live, Hamlet gives his enemy time to plot against him. The choice to let Claudius lives marks Hamlets decline and directly leads to his downfall after the deadly duel with Laertes. From this point on, it is Claudius not Hamlet who is one step ahead. The letter of execution and the conspiracy with Laertes are examples of Claudius policy toward Hamlet after the point of peripeteia. Hamlets accidental murder of Polonius can also be associated with peripeteia and is symbolic of Hamlet’s loss of control because it results in the secret Claudius-Laertes conspiracy. Hamlet experiences dénouement after he and Laertes exchange forgiveness. The action shows that Hamlet had become more rational and less vengeful especially after the death of Ophelia. Hamlet acknowledges the wrong of his rash murder of Polonius and tries to understand Laertes’ side of the conflict. His newfound decisiveness is expressed by his address to Horatio in which he recommends Fortinbras to the throne as forgiveness for the death of his father “But I do prophesie th' election lights / On Fortinbras, he ha's my dying voyce, / So tell him with the occurrents more and lesse,” (Shakespeare, Hamlet 5.2.3844-3846).

Tragedy, though it has been innovated over time, has largely retained the original form dictated by Aristotle and Ancient Greek society. The tragedies of *Things Fall Apart*, *Frankenstein*, and *Hamlet*, despite differing greatly in historical background, all follow incredibly similar structures. The tragic heroes Okonkwo, Frankenstein, and Hamlet all possess a hamartia that drives the plot through the stages of peripeteia, and dénouement. In their respective books, the heroes have many experiences unique to the culture from which they come. However, common thematic elements from the book show that despite some cultural distinctions the tragic genre is based on the collective subconscious of all of humanity.

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