

SHAKESPEAREAN COMEDY

Classification of His Plays: -

William Shakespeare's 37 plays can be divided into five groups: Comedies, tragedies, Tragi-comedies or Romances, Historical plays, and Roman Plays.

The Three Kinds Considered: -

The Purely Romantic Comedies are a continuation of the pre-Shakespearean tradition. Characters and plot are a mingling of realism and fantasy. Shakespeare's fancy, which was half-emotional and half-intellectual, sheds its own light on character and scene, making romantic the ordinary things of life and making realistic the most imaginative and improbable characters and events. The settings and incidents in 'The Two Gentlemen of Verona', 'A Midsummer Night's Dream', 'As You Like It', and 'Twelfth Night' are all imaginary. The Serious Comedies 'Much Ado About Nothing', 'All's Well That Ends Well', 'Merchant of Venice' and 'Measure for Measure', are half-tragic and half-playful. They may be considered as leading the way towards the fuller romantic tragi-comedy. In the category of Realistic Comedy 'The Taming of the Shrew' and 'The Merry Wives of Windsor' are more closely associated with Ben Jonson. The pleasant courtly humour of the earlier plays is here largely replaced by Farce and Fun. These two plays and 'The Comedy of Errors' represent the nearest approach in Shakespeare to the Classical comedies of Plautus and Terence.

Part Played by Women: -

The feminine roles are as important as the masculine. In fact the heroine is often superior to the hero, as in 'As You Like It', 'Twelfth Night', and several other comedies. A tragedy is essentially a play with a single hero as in 'Othello' and others.

Love and Marriage as Motif: -

Love leading to the marriage, is the theme of Shakespearean comedy. Often more than one pair is ultimately joined in wedlock, each having worked out its destiny in a plot of its own, one pair is always superior to the others.

Mirth and Laughter: -

The prevailing note in all Shakespearean comedies is that of mirth and laughter.

Stress on Character: -

The plot is subordinate to character. The tale may be interesting, but our chief pleasure is derived from certain of its figures. Portia is more impressive than the forced situation in 'The Merchant of Venice'.

Realism and Fantasy: -

Shakespeare's comedies are a blend of observation and imagination, fact and fiction. Scenes, character, and plot hover between the real and the unreal. The English countryside is transformed into the forest of Arden, English courtiers into the Duke and his friends in exile.

Songs: -

Music is an essential feature of the world of Shakespearean comedy. It is of various kinds. There is the court songs and music in most of comedies. All the types of music delighted the Elizabethan. It sometimes acts as a kind of commentary on the situation, heightening its effect.

The Clown: -

Several of Shakespeare's comedies introduce a Clown or Fool, who is often a great asset to the play. He is drawn partly from life and partly from literature. He provokes laughter by his wit, as Touchstone does in 'As You Like It', however he bears no integral relation to the main plot.

Plot Construction: -

Shakespeare's comic plots have the usual three phases of Exposition, Tangle, and Resolution. The first act is taken up by the Exposition, it introduces the various characters, at the same time throwing light on the circumstances in which the action is to take place. The next three acts develop a Tangle or complication, the fifth act effects a Resolution, satisfactory to all parties.

SHAKESPEAREAN TRAGEDY

Shakespeare's 'Hamlet', 'Othello', 'King Lear', and 'Macbeth' are the greatest tragedies. Of these, the first is a play of revenge, after the manner of Tomas Kyd's 'Spanish Tragedy', the second a domestic tragedy, and the third and fourth are chronicle histories with variations. All, however, are built upon a common plan, i.e. of Characterisation and Plot

CHARACTERISATION

One Key Figure and High Status of the Hero: -

Though there are several characters, Shakespeare's tragedies are ultimately concerned with only one character – the hero- whose fortunes are its real theme. The other characters, though sufficiently interesting in themselves, serve only to provide the links in the story of his fate. None of the four greatest tragedies has love for its theme. Their theme is rather, hatred and revenge, jealousy and suspicion, envy and ingratitude, ambition and intrigue. .

Shakespeare's tragic hero is not an ordinary mortal. He is not a superman however, his rank or gifts raise him above the other characters and what happens to him is of public importance. Hamlet is the prince of Denmark, Lear is the king of Britain, and Macbeth and Othello are the distinguished soldiers.

The Hero's Fatal or Tragic Flaw: -

Shakespeare's tragic hero is a man of many noble qualities but with one flaw that causes his ruin. Hamlet has 'the courtier's, soldier's, scholar's eye, sword, tongue but he suffers from an indecision that causes his end. Othello is a 'noble and valiant general', but he is a slave to jealousy. Macbeth is a 'peerless kinsman, full of the milk of human kindness', but he is possessed of black and deep desires which lead him his destruction. Lear is 'every inch a king' but his violent temper and lack of judgment proved his undoing. Thus, the tragic or fatal flaw in their characters causes their end.

Fate and Character: -

In Greek tragedy the characters are the victims of an implacable destiny. Their doom is decreed beforehand, and they cannot escape it. This conception is quite different in Shakespeare's tragedies because his tragic figures bring their fate down on themselves by some errors of their own, from some inherent flaw in their nature. They embark upon a course by which their ruin is eventually assured. That course may be directed by two influences beyond their control – the influence of the Supernatural and the play of Chance. The choice in each case however, remains with the hero, who can resist these influences if he so chooses and thus, his character involves his fate.

PLOT

Romantic Structure, External and Internal Conflict: -

Every one of Shakespeare's tragedies violates the Classical Unities and hence they have a Romantic Structure because he was writing the Romantic Elizabethan Age. In Shakespearean tragedy, the violent and vivid action on the stage has its counterpart in the inner conflict in the hero's mind and ultimately he suffers defeat both outwardly and inwardly. The presentation of this inner conflict is a difficult task for the most accomplished actor. Thus, the demands it makes on the tragic actor are as formidable as, any make in the past. Even a Soliloquy must nowadays make to reveal character. The capital difficulty of the modern tragic actor's art is to achieve the required consistency of character.

Rise and Fall of Fortune: -

The first part of Shakespearean play shows the rise of the hero's fortunes, and the rest his downfall. Macbeth attains his greatness and afterwards his downfall and end. This is the more usual and more truly dramatic form, as it provides such an emphatic contrast between triumph and disaster.

Many Victims and Uplifting Effect: -

The hero is not the only person whose life is forfeited. The last scene of 'Hamlet' closes with several dead bodies on the stage, Macbeth closes with several deaths. In the hands of a great poet such stories of undeserved suffering and death do not depress us. On the other hand, the spectacle of noble or powerful characters at was with circumstances tends rather to strengthen and exalt the spirit.

Plot Construction: -

The tragic plot, like the comic, is composed of three parts: Exposition, Conflict and Crisis followed by Catastrophe. The Exposition explains the situation with which the play opens, the Conflict develops the main theme and the Crisis shows the hero in his last stage moving to Catastrophe.

SHAKESPEAREN ROMANCES

Shakespeare's last plays 'Cymbeline', 'The Winter's Tale' and 'The Tempest' are called the Romances because they are neither Tragedies, nor Comedies, but a mixture of both. The scene is a place unknown to orthodox geography. The period of action in these plays is so remote as to make the setting imaginary. The place in 'Cymbeline' is in early Britain, 'The Winter's Tale' happened in Sicily where there is non existent sea-coast of Bohemia. The setting of these Romances seems to be strange.

Plot and Atmosphere: -

What happens in these plays is really fanciful. There is little relation between cause and effect. The plot of Romances is complicated. The story of 'Cymbeline' is taken from Boccaccio's Decameron, 'The Winter's Tale' has some historical foundation, and 'The Tempest' would have been taken from a voyage of a sailor to the West Indies. It suggests that Shakespeare had not his own plots but borrowed them all over the place and presented with some modifications in them which earned more credit for him.

The action of these plays does not take place in any real world. The atmosphere of 'The Tempest' is almost that of a fairy-tale, and that of 'Cymbeline' does not suggest anything known of Roman Britain. So, atmosphere of all these play give effect of having wandered into strange surrounding straight from Elizabethan England.

Characterisation and Supernatural Element: -

The characters are either types or have not the strong personalities of the earlier plays of Shakespeare. They are no longer individuals. The Supernatural is prominent in 'Cymbeline' and 'The Tempest' and 'The Winter's Tale' introduces the Delphic Oracle.

Dialogue and Spirit of Reconciliation: -

The dialogue is characterized by the excessive use of speeches of explanation to make the complicated action clear to the audience. They are very remote from any natural exchange of information. A decline is also noticeable in the style. In each of these plays errors of heart are shown to the audience. Wrong of man to man are described as cruel as those of the great tragedies. The resolution of the disorder in these plays is not a mere stage necessity restored to by the dramatist to effect an ending of his play. Its significance here is ethical and spiritual, it is a moral necessity. While staging these Romances, Shakespeare's own personality remained as much in the background as ever. These Romances influenced Beaumont and Fletcher, the two younger contemporaries of Shakespeare.

SHAKESPEARE'S ENGLISH HISTORICAL PLAYS

The chronicle play grew out of the Moralities in the 16th century. The University wits were the first of the Elizabethans to popular it, Peele with his 'Edward I', Christopher Marlowe with his 'Edward II' and Greene with his 'James IV'. It was natural therefore, that Shakespeare should follow them because he was writing for a theatre that depended for its success on meeting the popular taste.

Classification: -

Shakespeare has written six full length portraits of English kings, they are called his Historical Plays. They fall into two groups: 1) King John, Richard II, and Henry VI they are called as studies of kingly weakness; 2) Henry IV, Henry V, and Richard III they are called as studies of kingly strength. Here we may recognize the one dominant subject of the histories that how a man may fail and how a man may succeed in attaining a practical mastery of the world.

Their Technique: -

The aim of Shakespeare, as of the other Elizabethan dramatists, in writing chronicle plays was to represent as many as possible of the famous events of a single reign. It is in the non-historical scenes, like those devoted to Falstaff and his companions, that we see the dramatist's genius at its richest and most prodigal. The main subject of the chronicle play was character and motive as factors in history, illustrated in a series of historical episodes, the central personage of the play is studied closely and intimately in all his aspects and more than once we are shown him as a troubled, lonely human being, bent by the weight of the responsibilities he has to bear.

Histories and Tragedies: -

There is fundamental difference between the English historical plays and the major tragedies. In historical plays the theme is success or failure in attaining practical objectives in the material world. In the tragedies the problem and the goal are of the spiritual order. The tragic heroes have their own measure of greatness; the standards one would apply to the career of an English king are not valid with them.

Shakespeare's Source: -

The material for Shakespeare's historical plays was taken from the Chronicles of Raphael Holinshed, published in 1577, though he also consulted two other chroniclers, Edward Hall and John Stow. Though he added and omitted freely, according to his requirements, he adhered to the original for the most part. His occasional departure from historical fact, for the sake of simplification or greater dramatic effect, is not seriously misleading.

SHAKESPEARE'S ROMAN PLAYS

Elizabethan Interest in Roman Plays: -

One of the results of the Renaissance in England was the growth of interest in classical life and literature. Every fresh addition to the knowledge of the history and thought of ancient Greece and Rome was eagerly welcomed. It was easy for the English to identify themselves with the Romans, whose occupation of Britain had left so firm an impression on their life. Shakespeare himself must have been keenly conscious of this affinity between his countrymen and their ancient rules.

Fidelity to the Original: -

Shakespeare treated his sources in Plutarch's biographies in Roman plays much the same way as he treated the chroniclers when he wrote his English historical plays. He followed the same outline, but he amplified, omitted, or reconstructed at his own will. He did not overload his plays with classical terms and allusions. His Roman artists were very like the Elizabethan working-man that made them all the more congenial to his audience.

Their Tragic Technique: -

The Roman plays are structurally tragedies; they are not histories like the English chronicle plays. Their main theme is the ruin of noble soul, as in the other great tragedies. Some of his greatest Roman plays are 'Julius Caesar', 'Antony and Cleopatra' and 'Coriolanus'. There is a striking resemblance between 'Hamlet' and 'Julius Caesar', 'Macbeth' and 'Antony and Cleopatra' and 'Coriolanus' and 'King Lear'.

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