

Aristotle's concept of ideal tragic hero

The function of a tragedy is to arouse the emotions of pity and fear and Aristotle deduces the qualities of his hero from this function. He should be good, but not perfect, for the fall of a perfect man from happiness into misery, would be unfair and repellent and will not arouse pity. Similarly, an utterly wicked person passing from happiness to misery may satisfy our moral sense, but will lack proper tragic qualities. His fall will be well-deserved and according to 'justice'. It excites neither pity nor fear. Thus entirely good and utterly wicked persons are not suitable to be tragic heroes.

Similarly, according to Aristotelian law, a saint would be unsuitable as a tragic hero. He is on the side of the moral order and hence his fall shocks and repels. Besides, his martyrdom is a spiritual victory which drowns the feeling of pity. Drama, on the other hand, requires for its effectiveness a militant and combative hero. Now, in this connection, it would be important to remember that Aristotle's conclusions are based on the Greek drama with which he was familiar. Again, it is also important to note that Aristotle in *Poetics* was laying down the qualifications of an ideal tragic hero. Hence Aristotle pointed out that:

“The ideal tragic hero ... must be an intermediate kind of person, a man not pre-eminently virtuous and just, whose misfortune, however, is brought upon him not by vice or depravity but by some error of judgment.”

Thus, following Aristotle, the ideal tragic hero is a man who stands midway between the two extremes. He is not eminently good or just, though he inclines to the side of goodness. He is like us, but raised above the ordinary level by a deeper vein of feeling or heightened powers of intellect or will. He is idealized, but still he has so much of common humanity as to enlist our interest and sympathy.

The tragic hero is not evil or vicious, but he is also not perfect and his disaster is brought upon him by his own fault. The Greek word used here is “Hamartia” meaning “missing the mark”. He falls not because of the act of outside agency or evil but because of Hamartia or “miscalculation” on his part. Aristotle himself distinguishes Hamartia from moral failing. He means by the term, some error in judgment. He writes that the cause of the hero's fall must lie “not in depravity, but in some error or Hamartia on his part”. He does not assert or deny anything about the connection of Hamartia with hero's moral failings.

“It may be accompanied by moral imperfection, but it is not itself a moral imperfection, and in the purest tragic situation the suffering hero is not morally to blame.”

Therefore Hamartia is an error or miscalculation, but the error may arise from any of the three ways: It may arise from “ignorance of some fact or circumstance”, or secondly, it may arise from hasty or careless view of the special case, or thirdly, it may be an error voluntary, but not deliberate, as acts committed in anger. Else and Martian Ostwald interpret Hamartia and say that the hero has a tendency to err created by lack of knowledge and he may commit a series of errors. This tendency to err characterizes the hero from the beginning and at the crisis of the play it is complemented by the recognition scene, which is a sudden change “from ignorance to knowledge”.

In fact, Hamartia is a word with various shades of meaning and has been interpreted by different critics. Still, all serious modern Aristotelian scholarship agreed that Hamartia is not moral imperfection. It is an error of judgment, whether arising from ignorance of some material circumstance or from rashness of temper or from some passion. It may even be a character, for the hero may have a tendency to commit errors of judgment and may commit series of errors. This last conclusion is borne out by the play *Oedipus Tyrannus* to which Aristotle refers time and again and which may be taken to be his ideal. In this play, hero's life is a chain of errors, the most fatal of all being his marriage with his mother. If King Oedipus is Aristotle's ideal hero, we can say with Butcher that:

“His conception of Hamartia includes all the three meanings mentioned above, which in English cannot be covered by a single term.”

Hamartia is an error, or a series of errors, “whether morally culpable or not,” committed by an otherwise noble person, and these errors drive him to his doom. The tragic irony lies in the fact that hero may err mistakenly without any evil intention, yet he is doomed no less than immorals who sin consciously. He has Hamartia and as a result his very virtues hurry him to his ruin.

Aristotle lays down another qualification for the tragic hero. He must be, “of the number of those in the enjoyment of great reputation and prosperity.” He must be a well-reputed individual occupying a position of lofty eminence in society. This is so because Greek tragedy, with which alone Aristotle was familiar, was written about a few distinguished royal families. Aristotle considers eminence as essential for the tragic hero. But Modern drama demonstrates that the meanest individual can also serve as a tragic hero, and that tragedies of Sophoclean grandeur can be enacted even in remote country solitudes.

However, Aristotle’s dictum is quite justified on the principle that, “higher the state, the greater the fall that follows,” or because heavens themselves blaze forth the death of princes, while the death of a beggar passes unnoticed. But it should be remembered that Aristotle nowhere says that the hero should be a king or at least royally descended. They were the Renaissance critics who distorted Aristotle and made the qualification more rigid and narrow.