Aeschylus’ *The Libation Bearers* and Sophocles’ *Oedipus the King* as Paradigms of Aristotle’s Concept of Tragedy in *Poetics*

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In ancient Greece, the roots of drama reach back to worship of a god in a ritual dance. Thespis of Athens (c.535 B.C.) is credited with being the “Father of the Drama.” Dionysus was the god whose celebration gave birth to drama. Being the fertility god who blessed crops and cattle, the Festival of Dionysus in 534 B.C., was established as an official state holiday. It was during this festival that lasted for three to four days that tragedies were staged as a competition in which the successful prize winners were rewarded.

The theatre was a temple of Dionysus, with his altar in the centre. It was a huge place in the open air accommodating about 20,000 people seated on tiered seats, as in a gallery. The ‘orchestra’, or dancing ground, was the central feature of the theatre. The chorus was situated in this semi circular space in front of the stage, on which was placed the altar to Dionysus, where sacrifices were made before the plays began. Since the theatre was also a temple, murders and scenes of violence were reported by a messenger, although the screams of the victim would be heard.

The manner of performance, naturally, corresponded to the existing conditions. Movements were slow and mannered. Actors wore elevated shoes called buskins both because they were bigger than life and for the practical reason of being seen by all of the audience. They wore masks that represented the dominant mood throughout the play. Along with the actors, limited to two or three were the chorus, a group of people who mediated
between the actors and the audience, sometimes as spectators, sometimes as commentators and quite often they constituted a character itself. The prime function of the tragedy was religious and moral:

its themes mirrored man’s endless conflicts both with the non human forces controlling his destiny and with himself – with the inner forces keeping him from happiness. The conflicts - external and internal - were embodied in stories already familiar to Greeks, in the myths and legends that constituted their cultural heritage… Similarly reflecting its origin in dance ritual, the form of early tragedy was choric and lyric rather than dramatic: theme overwhelmed character; narrative and interpretative elements overshadowed the limited action of the protagonist. (Weber 11)

By the 5th century, Tragedy had formed certain characteristics more through habit than convention. For instance, the fact that the audience already knew the stories of the plot, and the masks worn by the actors did not offer much possibility for development of character. In the same way, Aeschylus added a character to the already existing one because his tragic conceptions demanded this form, and when Sophocles made way for the third actor, drama also developed plot-wise and character-wise technically affecting the dramatic movement. In Greek plays, the hero usually acted with the best intentions, but they had the opposite effect. The irony that ensued due to the wide gap between a man’s intentions and achievement was exploited by the dramatist to arouse pity and fear in the audience. The presence of the chorus marked the scenes and also made it almost impossible for the audience to imagine much change of place or sudden gap in time. This was called the Three Unities of Plot, Place and Time, which later were laid down as rules.
When Aristotle wrote his famous *Poetics*, as an analysis of poetry and drama, whatever he stated was based on his observation of the poetry and plays of his time. Aristotle was born at Stagina, in Macedonia, in 384 B.C. The *Poetics* cannot be dated, but it is considered to be a late work, in incomplete form and coherent on some of the topics it treats. It is not a manual of instruction for the would-be playwright. Aristotle’s main intention was to describe and define what appeared to have been most effective in the practice of the best poets and playwrights, and to make suggestions about what he regarded as the best procedure. (Dorsch 18)

It was the Renaissance critics, such as Castelvetro, who formulated in the rigid terms the “Aristotelian rules” of the unities of time, place and action. Aristotle did no such thing, and even in his time many Greek plays exceeded twenty-four hours in their time of action. On the other hand, Aristotle stresses the principle of organic unity in plot in the *Poetics* when he says

> Again, a beautiful object, whether it be a living organism or any whole composed of parts, must not only have an orderly arrangement of parts, but must also be of a certain magnitude; for beauty depends on magnitude and order. (Chap. VII)

In Chapter VI, Aristotle defines the nature of tragedy:

> Tragedy, then is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative: through pity and fear effecting proper purgation of these emotions. (Chap.VI)
Of its constituent parts he mentions plot, character, diction, thought, spectacle and song. In Chapter IX he insists that “it is not the function of the poet to relate what has happened, but what may happen, what is possible according to the law of probability or necessity,” thereby introducing the element of fiction or imagination that leads to universal truths. He moves on to simple and complex plots where “Reversal of the Situation”, (peripeteia), “Recognition”,(anagnorisis), include a third part, the “Scene of Suffering” adding to the complexity and dignity of the tragic plot. Chapters XIII and XIV enlarge on “pity” and “fear” which induce “catharsis” or the purgation of such emotions. It is here that the concept of “hamartia” or “some error or frailty” is mentioned. Chapter XIX concerns thought and diction relating to the “manner” of expression of tragedy.

Tragedy flourished in the 5th century in what is known as Periclean Greece, nurturing the geniuses of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, the three great Greek tragedians, who together “reflect the drift of the 5th century thought from orthodoxy to radicalism, from sublime confidence to disillusionment: the evolution of drama from an adjunct of religious ritual to a secular art” (Weber 33).

Oresteia, Aeschylus’ only extant trilogy (although he wrote more than seventy plays of which only seven survive) won first prize in 458 B.C. It unfolds a series of barbaric blood revenges – brother against brother, wife against husband, son against mother- which reflect the transition from primitive tribal institutions of justice to civilized communal justice. He also attempts to reveal God’s ways to man by showing the relationship between Fate or Chance and the will of Zeus.

The problem of evil becomes a focus of study for Aeschylus in an age when religion was undergoing a change from barbarism to universalism reaching for humanistic ideals. The gods of Homer and Hesiod were often immoral, capricious and imperfect beings hardly serving as models for mankind. Aeschylus projects his views about the source and nature of
evil and suffering, and the relationship between divine fate and individual guilt, emphasizing that suffering has meaning.

In *Oresteia*, Aeschylus treats the entire story of the House of Atreus told neither chronologically nor in one place, with flashbacks to fill in the time gaps. Although the story itself is full of violent action, very little of action is actually presented on the stage. Instead, the results of action rather than the action itself is related in long choral odes. The central play of the trilogy, *The Libation Bearers*, opens at Argos in an impressive spectacle with Orestes kneeling and praying at the tomb of his father. In the background looms the house of Atreus. The scene itself is replete with religious associations like Orestes in an attitude of prayer offering two locks of hair laying them on the grave, and Electra arriving with a long procession of slave women carrying libations that are ritualistically poured on Agamemnon’s tomb, all of which falls naturally with the mood of the audience celebrating a festival and seated in a temple.

The opening lines are an invocation to Hermes, the messenger of the gods, moving between the Hades and the Earth. Although the play begins with on an ominous note; within the next fifteen lines there is a shift in perspective as Orestes notes the arrival of the procession of “Women, robed in black … so clear in the early light” (13). The dramatist clearly marks the shift from ‘black’ to ‘light’, from barbarian to civilization, from chaos to order, from meaningless tragic suffering to wisdom gained from travail. The chorus, the slave women take over as Orestes and his friend Pylades hide behind the tomb. The chorus continues to reinforce the revenge theme, singing,

The proud dead stir under earth,

they rage against the ones who took their lives. (44, 45)

and categorically states that

And the blood that Mother Earth consumes
clots hard, it won’t seep through, it breeds revenge

and frenzy goes through the guilty,

Seething like infection swarming through the brain. (66-69).

Like a chain, link by link, the revenge motif continues, fluid, slithering through the play. Orestes pleads ‘not guilty’ for he is goaded into action only because of Apollo’s command:

“Gore them like a bull!” he called, “or pay their debt

With your own life, one long career of grief.” (280, 281)

Electra cries out for revenge too, as she shudders on recalling the crude betrayal of their “Reckless, brutal mother” and their father entombed “unwept, unsung” (421). The leader and Chorus incite revenge by reminding them, “Your father mutilated – do you hear?” (431) until Orestes decides that he would turn serpent and kill his mother as seen in her dream, and declares:

They killed an honoured man by cunning, so

they die by cunning, caught in the same noose. (543, 544)

The poet-dramatist whips up the feeling of revenge through dialogue and song reaching a climax through stichomythia, line by line dialogue which runs as follows:

**Orestes:** O Earth, bring father up to watch me fight.

**Electra:** O Persephone, give us power – lovely, gorgeous power!

**Orestes:** Remember the bath - they stripped away your life, my father.

**Electra:** Remember the all- embracing net-- they made it first for you.
**Orestes:** Chained like a beast – chains of hate, not bronze, my father!

**Electra:** Shamed in the schemes, the hoods they slung around you!

Orestes Does our taunting wake you, oh my father?

**Electra:** Do you lift your beloved head? (476-83).

Real action happens only from line 631 onwards till the play closes with the line 1076 giving a feast of poetry and drama for an audience that had a taste for both. Aeschylus continues his use of contrasts charging the atmosphere with irony. When Clytaemnestra meets Orestes he is stranger, not son; it is the nurse, Cilissa, who genuinely mourns Orestes’ “death”, not the mother, “bad” news turns into “good” and the “dead” are killing the “living”. Finally, after Orestes has cut off the heads of “two serpents once for all” he himself is hounded by Gorgon-like women “their heads wreathed / swarming serpents!” (1049 – 150). Retribution follows him in a relentless chase. The final words of the chorus

> Where will it end? -
> Where will it sink to sleep and rest,
> this murderous hate, this Fury? (1074-76)

come as a poignant message from the dramatist to eschew violence and revenge as a form of wild ‘justice’, to get freed from the vicious circle of crime and retribution and try to restore order in a chaotic society.

Aeschylus uses Spectacle in the beginning of the play with the tomb and the altar in full view, and the long procession of women slaves led by Electra. Considerable interest is aroused when Electra recognizes her brother’s locks of hair and foot prints. The Recognition is followed by the happy reunion of brother and sister leading to further avowal of revenge on the guilty couple. A parallel pattern is repeated at the end of the play when Recognition,
mother of the son, leads to a Reversal as Clytaemnestra’s nightmare comes true. There is Spectacle when Orestes stands over the bodies of his mother and Aegesthus, displaying the robes that entangled Agamemnon. The unities of place and time are followed – the scene shifting from the tomb to the house of Atreus, and the action starting with the early morning and ending at night of the same day. Diction is a compressed, metaphorical style where through a reiteration of key metaphors like the net and the web, Aeschylus achieves unity of imagery. Aeschylus employs interplay of sounds and sights. With Aeschylus, language is not an instrument but an entity, a vibrant self-sufficient thing, working in close harmony with the objects filling in the stage of the Oresteia. The word textures pronounced by the chorus, like the sentence patterns of the actor’s speeches, stir the audience as violently as the sight of a crimson tapestry or the vision of evil Furies on the roof. (Rosenmeyer 151)

There is conventional use of the proverb and riddle. The stranger- messenger who announces the death of Orestes is promised a reward, in keeping with tradition; the same situation gets reversed in Oedipus the King where they must have run in different directions with the hope of reward shattered by the Reversal caused by their pronouncements. The Leader and chorus become one of the actors, and they are shown as sympathetic to Orestes and Electra and antagonistic to the wicked, royal couple. They also dutifully perform their role dividing scene from scene.

Aeschylus died just before the middle of the 5th century B.C. and Sophocles nearly at the end. The former justified divine order in a golden age that seemed to confirm divine favour, but the latter witnessed changes economically, politically, and culturally marking the decline of Athens. In spite of the pervading demoralization and disorder,
Sophocles did not lose faith in the traditional. Through his characters, he affirmed that a “moral order governed the universe, that man creates his own problems but that finite man can not always grasp infinite purpose. Over all his generations arches the inscrutable divines; and man must endure, act piously, walk humbly” (Weber 22). While Aeschylus justified the ways of the gods to man, Sophocles, in addition, justifies the ways of man to man.

Sophocles was born in about 496 B.C., wrote about 123 plays of which only eight survive and won at least 24 Dionysian contests. He used the Oedipus myth in a trilogy written years apart and not in the chronological order; Antigone which should have come in the end was produced first, and fifteen years later came Oedipus the King. In the plays he deals with the myth’s “social and ethical implications about tyranny, the divine and the moral law, oracles and prophets, kinship, sin and punishment, and individual responsibility” (Weber 23). He introduced the third actor, making conflict between characters possible as with Creon and Oedipus. He dramatized rather than narrated story as in the case of Aeschylus whose works comprise mostly poetry rather than action, vastly improved characters making them ‘rounded’, and made his choruses short while expanding their role. He introduced elaborate scenery and costumes enhancing the spectacle appeal in plays. His masterly employment of the “irony of fate” and ‘tragic irony’ made his plays theatrically effective and emotionally exciting.

**Oedipus the King** centres around the self-discovering of Oedipus and of his crimes. The concluding lines of the chorus in Antigone continues thematically to be relevant to this play, which says,

> Of happiness for the greatest part
> Is wisdom, and reverence towards the gods.
> Proud words of the arrogant man in the end,
Meet punishment, great as his pride was great,

Till at last he is schooled in wisdom. (1285-89)

The play has a spectacular opening scene with the priest and citizens of Thebes each with their “suppliant branch” kneeling before the altars while the priest addresses Oedipus before the royal palace. The king is expected to become their “Saviour” while the king addresses the citizens as “my children” treating their pain as his very own. He is their “hero” and having once delivered them from the Sphinx, they are confident of his success a second time when the land is oppressed by plagues. Oedipus, then, is man of high stature, as befits a tragic hero, eager to obey the gods and seek justice, “wise above all other men to read / Life’s riddles and hidden ways of Heaven” (33,34). Ironically, Oedipus himself is an unsolved riddle and all his calculations go awry starting with the logic that by destroying Laius’ murderer he would be protecting himself. The entry of Teiresias, the blind prophet, introduces themes of blindness and knowledge. The prophet “knows” and can “see” the future, whereas Oedipus is “blind” and does not “know” the horrors of his future ruin. In his conflict with Teiresias, the tyrant in Oedipus is exposed. He taunts the blind prophet mercilessly calling him “blind / In eyes and ears and brain and everything” (363–4) and pride rears its ugly head when he boasts,

I, knowing nothing, put the Sphinx to flight,

Thanks to my wit – no thanks to divination! (388-389)

inviting upon himself the wrath of Teiresias who predicts his downfall as an exile, blinded and humiliated. Pride (hubris) and false over confidence (hamratia) cause the downfall of this mighty king in keeping with Aristotle’s tragic pattern.

Three points of climax are identified by H.D.F Kitto – the condemnation of Creon by Oedipus: the discovery, with the subsequent self-blinding of Oedipus; and the actual end of the play. In the first part, the character of Oedipus is developed and blindness as
a theme introduced. The second part reveals a contrast in attitudes – of knowledge and
certainty by Oedipus and humble acceptance of ignorance and caution by Creon. The final
part also has a lesson to teach, in the advice of Creon:

Seek not to have your way in all things:

Where you had your way before,

Your mastery broke before the end. (1462 – 64)

Laius had made the same mistake in handing over the infant to be killed hoping to avert fate.
He thought he had everything under control. Oedipus was equally sure he was overruling fate
by avoiding Corinth. Sophocles makes Fate or Chance prominent in the play and and seems
to point out at the same time the complexity of life, the limitation of human knowledge and
the stark ironies of life that often defeat man’s best intentions.

Aristotle’s “catharsis” has been a matter of controversy whether purgation is
pathological, psychological or ethical. The end of the play was already known to the audience
because the plot was some familiar mythical story. What then moved the audience enough to
effect a beneficial change in them? Dr.Lopa Sanyal makes a sharp observation that

For the audience, it may be said the tragedy lies not in the catastrophe, but in the
waiting. It is the flow of time that is hard to bear; the end brings peace, and sometimes
hope of resurrection. (174)

In a sense, the play lives out this principle of waiting as the crowd and Oedipus ‘wait’ first
for the arrival of Creon and for the blind poet. It is as the audience moves through the play
that feelings of terror and pity are built up for the protagonist, and in empathy with the
sufferings of the hero that one emerges wiser and cleansed and refreshed in spirit. Who
indeed, can deny that dramatists of old were expert psychologists? However, that Sophocles
was a moralist is beyond shadow of doubt, for Fate may take its own unexplainable course, but what is made clear by Creon towards the end of the play is “now you may believe the god”. Aristotle’s third element Suffering is not linked to violent acts or death. “Tragic suffering,” as the Greeks had termed it was a spiritual crisis involving undeserved suffering as in Oedipus or suffering of one who is caught between the necessity to act and the knowledge of inevitable guilt as in Orestes, necessary because in the classic statement of Aeschylus’ “Wisdom comes alone through suffering” (Sewall 30).

The presence of gods in Greek Tragedy is all-pervasive, a multitude of them inhabiting the play mostly through the invocations and frequent addresses made to them. In Aeschylus’ The Libation Bearers, the chorus is forever invoking Zeus, Apollo and Hermes to support and favour Orestes in his endeavour to establish justice. Yet when the play ends, although the Leader tells Orestes “Farewell then. God look down on you with kindness, guard you, grant you fortune” (1062, 63), one is left with an uncertainty along with the chorus whether Orestes is afflicted psychologically being guilt-ridden after the matricide or whether the “hounds of his mother’s hate” are literal and real. In Sophocles’ Oedipus, on the other hand, although Oedipus is predestined to destruction, the poet makes the character of Oedipus responsible for his actions; hence, in Oedipus’ words,

   It was Apollo, friends, Apollo
   He decreed that I should suffer what I suffer;
   But the hand that struck, alas! was my own,
   And not another’s. (1276-79)

It was a cosmic vision that the Greek tragedians envisaged but human qualities (hamartia) and their consequences placed responsibility squarely on man’s shoulders, as in Oedipus’ rash flight from Corinth “prefigures the hasty, ill-tempered and irrelevant steps of his
inquisition on the day of his down fall” (Wimsatt 44). Aeschylus and Sophocles both shared a moral consciousness far ahead of their time; in their plays they “imitated” life filled with ironies and contraries with characters entrapped by Chance (tuche) struggling in making choices or blundering blindly, their hamartia working against them, yet through peripeteia and anagnorisis gain their moment of epiphany, or the hero’s final realization of the truth, all his sufferings find meaning in the ensuing humility and sublimity “ a fit match for the sublimity of nature and nature’s gods” (Raphael 55)!

**Greek Tragedy**

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