CHAPTER TWO

THE ORIGINS AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF TRAGEDY

In this chapter the concept of tragedy is dealt with in terms of its early origins and its development. It is divided into two sections: ancient Greek tragedy and Elizabethan tragedy. Accordingly, each section starts with a historical background about the Greek and Elizabethan eras in which tragedy started / developed as a genre. This historical information paves the way for the reader to know the importance of each era to the development of the concept tragedy.

As Aristotle is considered a forerunner in shaping the principles of tragedy in his Poetics, this chapter, structurally and thematically, deals with the terms and criteria of Aristotle’s definition that has been a framework of reference for all later criticism ever since.

Emphasis is paid to the structural and thematic approaches that shed light on the early Greek tragedies – namely, the plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides; and also of the Elizabethan tragedy, namely the plays of Thomas Kyd, Christopher Marlowe and most importantly Shakespeare for his tragedies set benchmarks in drama for all times.

This chapter ends with the commonwealth when the Puritans closed the theatres in 1642. Even then, the quality of tragedy of the Jacobean dramatists, those whose works flourished during the reign of James I, was perceived as a decline if the best of the Shakespearean tragedies are taken as a standard. After that John Milton, John Dryden and Shelly tried to revive tragedy but it was not until the second half of the nineteenth
century, with the plays of Henrik Ibsen and August Strindberg that something of the
vision returned to inspire the tragic theatre.

2.1 Ancient Greek Literature and Tragedy

2.1.1 A Historical Background

In recent years, several European and American writers have been inspired by the
ancient Greek classics to produce works close in form and spirit to the classics,
interpreting Greek myths in the light of contemporary thought. Actually, few works of
the ancient Greek literature survive but they remain important due to their supreme
quality and impact upon later literary works.

As we know, ancient Greek literature falls into three periods; the early or pre classical
literature (to the end of the sixth century BC), the Attic classical literature (the fifth and
the fourth centuries), and the decadent or Hellenistic and Greco–Roman literature (the
third century BC onward). The early period begins with Homer when epic poetry
flourished; the original epic was a genre which was intended to be sung and recited. Its
subject was the myth that was a mixture of historical events and primitive religious
speculation. Thus, the Iliad and the Odyssey are considered to represent the beginning of
Greek literature, as well as the base of later tragedies that intricately connected with
religious rites. Inspired by the poetry of Homer during the Attic period, poetry became
the chief medium of literary art. The name Attic came from the dialect used by the Ionian
who were distinguished and gifted among the main races of the ancient Greek i.e. the
Aeolian and the Dorian.¹ The Attic Age presented the three most notable figures of the
classical tragedy namely: Aeschylus (525–456 BC), Sophocles (496–406 BC) and
Euripides (480–406 BC). The third period started when Greece was subjected to Rome. At that time, Greek writers were conscious of belonging to a world of which Rome was the centre.

Tragedy, as a branch of drama, began in Greece during the fifth century B.C. Allardyce Nicoll’s *World Drama* says that Egypt may have provided an example of tragedy in the second or third millennium B.C., but the earliest texts are from Athens.²

The term ‘Tragedy’ is used today to describe any sort of disaster or misfortune, but more precisely, it refers to a work of art that examines seriously questions concerning the role of man in the universe. The ancient Attic playwrights first used the word to describe a specific kind of play, which was presented at festivals in Greece.

The word tragedy is derived from Greek ‘tragoidia’ which is often translated into English as a ‘goat-song’. It may be interpreted in several ways: a goat was sacrificed when the dithyrambs were sung; a goat might be the prize for the best song; or the goat was the symbol of Dionysus the Greek god of fertility. Sponsored and directed by the local governments for about three or four days, these plays were attended by the entire community.³

The atmosphere was more like that of a religious ceremony than entertainment. There were altars to the gods and the subjects of the tragedies were the misfortunes of the heroes of legends, religious myth and history. C.E. Vaughan’s words can be best considered to give an image of the Attic theatre: “The eyes of all fixed upon a stage and beneath it an altar round which the chorus either stands, or moves in stately measures, doing honour to Dionysus (the god of poetry, wine, ecstatic excitement and fertility),
taking part in the dramatic movement of the tragedy, invoking divine and human justice upon the deeds or words of those destinies that are at stake before the eye.” ⁴

For his part, Martin P. Nilsson points out that the form and style of ancient Greek tragedy was dictated by its ritual origins and performance in great dramatic competitions of the spring and winter religious festivals of Dionysus.⁵ Rebecca Bushnell states that the parts of Greek tragedy were shared by the actors and the chorus, the former speaking and the latter singing. This structure marks tragedy’s relationship to older forms of ritual choral song, and especially the dithyramb, a choral hymn in honour of Dionysus sung by fifty men or boys.⁶

In the first half of the sixth century B.C., the poet Arion had tried to organize the rites into a form of order and system. The dithyramb was transformed from the impromptu song or crude improvisation into a full choice hymn with musical gestures. Arion also “fixed the number of the dancers and singers at fifty and introduced some spoken verses amidst the choral odes.” ⁷

The dithyramb continued and its range was widened. The subjects chosen were not only from the legends of Dionysus but also from the rich Greek mythology. The pioneer in this phase was Thespis (the father of Greek tragedy) who was born in the sixth century in Icaria which was an important centre of the worship of Dionysus. Thespis’ greatest innovation was the introduction of an actor who was different from the leader or conductor of the chorus. He played the roles of gods and kings with different masks. It was then that a drama of action, not narration, was staged for the first time in the history of drama. The masks, as MacGowan and Melnitz remark, are a survival of the old religious services in which the human being must not be himself, but change his face and
The masks on which a fixed expression is painted or carved are used to fix the dominating trait of any character in the mind of the audience.

Tragedy became more and more popular, and many tragic playwrights submitted a number of plays at the annual exhibition. Choerilus, Pratinas and Phrynichus stood among those who followed the steps of Thespis but they did not make any remarkable contributions. It was with the appearance of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides that Greek tragedy began to offer immortal works of art.

Thespis, as we have already mentioned, introduced the first actor. Aeschylus added a second and Sophocles a third. The tragic plays that were presented during the first half of the fifth century B.C. were elaborate and complicated works of art. They combined within themselves many variegated elements like rhythm in spoken or recited poetry and vivid action. There was also music that accompanied the choral odes. In this sense Rebecca Bushnell states that “the structure of Greek tragedy is thus a powerful instrument, capable of manipulating mood, creating tension and modulating between intense personal action and lyric introspection.”

In Aeschylus’ Oresteia (458 B.C.), Sophocles’ Antigone (442 B.C.) and Oedipus, the King (430 B.C.) the action of the drama and the moral experience of the characters are wholly united to the metric form. Hence, Greek tragedy is sung, danced and declaimed; prose has no place in it. The tragic Greek playwrights made full use of these theatrical devices in their plays in addition to the rich Greek literary and dramatic tradition that we know chiefly through Homer’s masterpieces the Iliad and the Odyssey. Werner Jaeger points out that “tragedy owes both its traditional material and ethical
educational spirit to Homeric epic, not to its own Dionysian origin.”¹¹ Aeschylus himself asserts that his plays were all “slices from the banquet of Homer.”¹²

Aeschylus’ *The Suppliant Women* represents in all essentials, as Kitto points out, a “single actor drama up to the point when Danaus is able to do something useful by going into Argos to ask for help of its king, Pelasgus.” This drama is considered close to the form of its origin the dithyramb, because the action is kept to the minimum and the chorus, the daughters of Danaus, became a collective protagonist. Pelasgus is the only dramatic force that stands in opposition to the chorus. He has to decide between two equally decisive and at the same time dangerous courses of action; either to forsake the suppliant women, thus incurring the wrath of the gods or to fight the Egyptian suitors who came in pursuance of the women.

Nevertheless, at the hand of Aeschylus, we come to that form of Greek drama whose outward mark is the use of two actors and the chorus. It seems that Aeschylus had no intention of using the second actor as antagonist to the first one, thereby turning the tragedy into a contest between the two as is the case in Sophoclean tragedy. This comes only after the appearance of the third actor and is quite foreign to the tragic thinking of Aeschylus. As a matter of fact, the essence of old or Aeschylean tragedy was the solitary hero facing his own destiny or playing out an inner drama of his own soul, like Pelasgus in *The Suppliant Women*. It was the insertion of the second actor that enabled the plot to move in action as well as in tension. Instead of watching Pelasgus caught inextricably in his tragic dilemma, the spectators watch the interaction between the moving situation and the hero. In *Seven against Thebes* (467 B.C.) there is no sudden pit opening beneath Eteocles, but a horror growing gradually before the audience as he is offered the chance

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to think carefully before making up his mind. This means that, unlike the almost undifferentiated Man who was the hero of the pure lyrical tragedy, the moving plot of Aeschylus’ tragedy was designed to display and test moral character, and to give room for moral choice and its outcomes.\textsuperscript{13}

The tragic situation in the plays of Sophocles represents an interlocking of certain complex circumstances and personalities, which eventually make a pattern that cannot be avoided. Moreover, the Sophoclean tragic hero is not a single minded man; he is a complex figure who must be seen from more than one point of view. Hence, the insertion of the third actor is to illuminate the character from several points of view. This technical innovation, as Kitto remarks, brought with it “a high degree of naturalism, more detailed character drawing and more skilful use of dialogue.”\textsuperscript{14} Oedipus, as a tragic hero, is better understood if one watches how he treats / behaves towards a group of people and how these people in return treat him. This way of handling the tragic plays became later on the basis for western and American drama as well.

2.1.2 Greek Tragedy: A Structural Approach

The most appropriate approach to the study of the structure of tragedy is to begin with Aristotle’s famous and much quoted definition of tragedy which is based on a careful examination of the works of the three tragedians (Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides), with special emphasis on Sophocles.

Tragedy, Aristotle states in definite terms is"… a representation of an action that is worth serious attention, complete in itself, and of a variety of artistic devices…presented in the form of action, not narration, by means of pity and fear bringing about the
purgation of such emotions….”15 Furthermore, Aristotle finds in tragedy six essential parts: plot, character, diction, thought, spectacle, and song (or musical lyrical element) provided by the chorus. Since traditionally tragedy begins with the chorus Nietzsche states that “tragedy arose out of the tragic chorus and was, to begin, nothing but chorus.”16 It seems appropriate to pick up this last element as a first step in the discussion. There is a general agreement among scholars and researchers that the chorus was the central nucleus and the original core out of which tragedy had developed. To its association with gods, tragedy owed its presentation of the chorus, who continued to express sentiments proper to the religious consciousness. A. Nicoll stresses the importance of focusing on the role of the chorus when reading Greek drama, for the “modifications introduced in its theatrical function provide a kind of record of the development of the tragic concept from the beginning in Aeschylus to the end of Euripides.”17

Aristotle points out that the chorus should be regarded as “one of the actors” and “part of the whole and should assume a share in the action, as happens in Sophocles but not in Euripides.”18 This significant statement sheds light on two aspects regarding the position of the chorus: its significance as a theatrical devise and the various changes it underwent. The members of the chorus perform several tasks. They serve as interested commentators upon the action. Sometimes, they function as a background of public opinion against which the situation of the particular play is projected. The choric songs are more than mere music. Sometimes, they are used to sound the ‘leit–motif’ of the play.

The death of Agamemnon in the play of that name by Aeschylus is the direct result, the chorus tells us, of the criminal sacrifice of his daughter Iphigenia and the
indirect result of evil deeds in the history of the house of Arteus, whose poison taints the third and fourth generations. Thus, we are shown the invisible background of the action and of human life, and hear the echoes of the unseen spiritual forces that direct and create the tragic events on the stage.

In general, the chorus often performs the task of “communicating to us a body of common thought and a feeling without which the dialogue would be bleak and limited” 19. At the hand of Sophocles, the chorus has a significant position as Bowra sums up the usage of the chorus and its position in his plays. He writes that Sophocles’ chorus “is usually an actor like the other actors, subject to error and to partial or limited understanding. It passes judgment and philosophizes, but most of its conclusions are no more valid for a final view of the play than are those of any other character.” 20

Thus, in making the chorus one of the actors, Sophocles was true to the Aristotelian doctrine. What is certain in plays like Oedipus, the King and Ajax is that the chorus behaves as a person not as a ‘machine’. It was his belief that there was a “canon that the chorus comments, in order, on those things of importance which have happened since it last spoke.” 21

As for Euripides, the chorus is no more than a convention that was inherited from the past theatrical practices and adapted for his own purposes. However, Euripides’ method, in dealing with the chorus, tends towards making it, as MacGowan states, an “interlude entertainment” whose statements and utterances do not contribute directly to the development of the plot. In fact, Euripides in his later tragedies did make the chorus a body of ‘ideal spectators’. This is evident in The Troades (415 BC), Hecuba (425 BC). In these plays, the chorus is far from being a co-actor; it takes no
notice of the action and virtually becomes the ideal spectator i.e. the chorus does not obey the Aristotelian dramatic canons.

As for the plot, Aristotle states that it is the most essential element in a tragedy: “Its life-blood...representation of men, out of action and life, of happiness and unhappiness [which] are bound with the action.”

Aristotle makes two observations about the plot of tragedy: firstly, it must be of certain structure. Secondly, that it should be “complete and whole”. A complete action is that which has a beginning, middle and end. Therefore, a well-constructed plot must neither begin nor end in a haphazard way, but should follow a logical pattern of a strict law of causality. Sophocles’ *Oedipus, the King* is near perfect in plot construction, Aristotle concludes. However, he considers Euripides’ tragic plot the worst in respect to construction. He also points out that the structure of tragedy at its best should be complex and include “peripeteia” and “anagnorisis” i.e. reversal of circumstances and sudden discovery or awareness of the vital truth.

Moreover, in constructing their tragic plots, the dramatists, Aristotle recommends, should avoid certain stories: firstly, the presentation of an exceedingly good man passing from prosperity to misery (for this would inspire neither fear nor pity; it is merely shocking). Secondly, an evil man also should not be shown progressing from misery to prosperity. This, Aristotle considers the most untragic of all plots, for it has none of the requisites of tragedy. Thirdly, an utterly worthless man should not be seen falling from prosperity into misery for such a course of action is neither moving nor moral.

The type of plot, which is the best, in Aristotle’s point of view, is the one that shows “a sort of man who is conspicuous for virtue and justice, and whose fall into
misery is not due to vice or depravity, but rather to some error, a man who enjoys prosperity and a high reputation like Oedipus.”

Since we are discussing structure, it is appropriate to examine the various parts into which a typical Greek tragedy is to be divided. They are: prologue, parodos, episode, stasimon exode, and choral song. The prologue is the opening scene of the play. In general it is devoted mainly to exposition in which the playwright acquaints the audience with the necessary information concerning the dramatic situation of the play. Portrayal of characters may also be included in the prologue and the action of the play may be initiated in this part. The prologue is followed by the Parodos or the first entrance hymn by the chorus. In general, the first choral lyric, Harsh points out, may often be termed the emotional exposition of the play for it normally gives further expositional background and strikes the proper emotional tone. As soon as the opening choral song has been completed, there comes the first episode. This is an exact counterpart of the act or scene in a modern play. This episode is usually followed by the stasimon, another complete choral song after which another episode occurs. Thus, the choral songs interrupt the action and mark off the tragedy into “chapters” of action. The number of these ‘Chapters’ or ‘Acts’ varies from play to play. Oedipus, the King can be roughly divided into six acts: the prologue, four episodes, and the exode or final catastrophe. As for Aeschylus, most of his plays have five acts. Eventually, it becomes customary to limit the number to five acts. Here we find the origin of the later dramatic rule of five acts in plot construction.

At the end of a Greek tragedy, especially that of Euripides, a divinity may appear, a “deus ex machina.” Aristotle expresses his disapproval of Euripides’ employment of this mechanical device. He believes that since the dramatist “must always aim at an
inevitable or probable order of events… the ending too, of his plot, must arise naturally out of the plot itself and not, as in Medea by external contrivance.”27 Although Euripides’ usage of “deus ex machina” has been frequently criticized as a dramatic defect in the sense that he resorted to it to get himself out of the difficulties into which the development of the plot has led him, this is not actually the case in his plays. In fact, the main purpose behind using it was for dramatic effect. The appearance of an Athena in shining armor above the roof of the temple in Iphigenia among the Taurians should have been quite striking. Thus, it was to produce these startling theatrical effects that the playwright decided to use this theatrical device.28

Another important dramatic ingredient, which is noteworthy, is the concluding part of the tragic play or the epilogue. At the end of most of Greek tragedies, the chorus sings a short song in which a brief or a summary review of what had happened is narrated or sometimes the chorus may tell us what the playwright really thinks about his play.29 On the other hand, in presenting his tragic plots, the Greek dramatist is limited by two important aspects: time and action. Greek tragedy, according to Aristotle endeavours to keep as far as possible “within a single circuit of the sun, or something near that.”30

The most moving things, Aristotle observes, are “peripeteia and anagnorisis”. Usually these terms are interpreted as “reversal of fortune” and “recognition” and are closely connected with the concept of “hamartia” which means a specific error which a man makes or commits. Oedipus, the King again is his typical example. The messenger who comes to cheer Oedipus and relieve him of his fear about his mother does the very opposite by revealing Oedipus’ true identity. “He [Oedipus] suffers a reversal of fortune; he comes to recognize his terrible change of fortune; and he is left at the end in utter
abjection.” Lucas remarks that the deepest and most effective tragedy occurs not when men are struck down by the blow of chance or fate, nor yet when they are destroyed by their enemies, but when their destruction is the work of those who wish them good or of their own unwitting hands. Accordingly, the most poignant tragedy of human life is the work of human blindness – the tragedy of ‘error’. This means that in the course of the action, the protagonist recognizes the truth of a situation, discovers another character’s identity or a realization about his relationship with that person. This sudden acquisition of knowledge or insight by the hero, Lucas believes, arouses the desired intense emotional reaction in the spectators, as when Oedipus finds out his true parentage and realizes what crimes he has been responsible for. Moreover, Drakakis and Liebler point out the feature of effective and real tragedy when a protagonist is inserted in a critical situation to make one of two difficult choices; between options which seem to be equally right to him. Thus, Hamartia is understood not as an optional and avoidable ‘error’ resulting from some inadequacy or ‘flaw’ in the character of the protagonist but as something that happens in consequence of the complex situation represented in the drama.

### 2.1.3 Greek Tragedy: A Thematic Approach

Greek tragedies often raise questions about man’s existence, such as his position in the scheme of things and the reasons behind his suffering. Accordingly, the theme of the position of man in the universe, as Jaeger states, is the classical theme not only of the Greek tragic dramas, but also of the Homeric epics and Greek philosophy as well. The context in which this theme is presented is essentially religious: man’s relationship with gods.
Gods play an important role in man’s life. They are the protectors of divine laws as well as civic order. To deny the existence of a deity or to feel superior to it was to risk reprisals from the deity or from other mortals. Hence, the underlying question of all Greek tragedies concerns the laws and standards by which gods let man live. To this question, tragedies never yield definite answers. The only result in each drama is one’s awareness of the unreliable and deceptive nature of human reason, the realization that the true shape of things cannot always be judged by their surface appearance, and the experience that man’s view and insight can be clouded over by demonic forces. In short, the tragic conflict reflects the experience of the nothingness of man before gods. No true understanding of the above mentioned ideas can be achieved without a proper understanding of the nature of Greek religion. It is a well-known fact that Greek religion does not represent a fixed body of doctrine; rather it is based on rites and cults. The Greek had no sacred book, and the concepts regarding the nature of the gods and man’s relation with them are mainly derived from mythology. Moreover, the Greek gods adopt an anthropomorphic human shape and human nature though enormous differences exist between man and gods.

Each one of the three Greek tragedians has his viewpoint about man-god relationship. While Aeschylus, in his plays, is concerned with justifying the ways of god to man, Sophocles is mainly concerned with the question of human beings who live in a world in which there are intrinsic conflicts, such as that between a transcendent moral or metaphysical order and natural human desire. Gods in Euripides’ plays are destructive forces, irrational, and unreasonable. In fact, Euripides denies the existence and the power of gods, but at the same time he presents gods as real and powerful sources in his plays.
The Greeks believe that Man’s attempt to cross the barrier in thought or action leads eventually to his punishment by gods. The divine justice operates, in Leech’s words, like an “avalanche” or an “echo in an enclosed space” and once the evil act is committed, it will bring consequences that are for more evil than the original act: there will be a train of evil acts. We may, therefore, easily understand why the theme or the motive of revenge is so common in Greek tragedy: the blood feud is the most obvious example of the kind of situation in which wrong inevitably leads to wrong; Aeschylus’ trilogy *Oresteia*, Sophocles’ *Electra*, and Euripides’ *Medea* deal with this theme.

Divine punishment results in human suffering. The terrors of human destiny and suffering are often at the centre of the tragedian’s concern. This problem again must be viewed within the context of the meaning of man’s existence. Although in Aeschylus’ dramas, evil is inescapable and suffering is inevitable, these dramas do confirm the fact that suffering could be a source of knowledge for the tragic hero about himself, his fellows and the conditions of his existence. In fact, Aeschylus believes that the highest knowledge could be attained only through suffering. All his tragedies are based upon that "mighty spiritual unity of suffering and knowledge." 38

As for Sophocles, the central idea of his tragedies is that through suffering, man learns to be modest before the gods. He tries to find the meaning of human existence through tragic self-knowledge. His characters are constantly acquiring knowledge about themselves in relation to gods. This is obvious with Ajax, Creon, Oedipus and Philoctetes. This means that the Greeks have a consistent view of human life as dependent on gods for everything that matters. Human life, as the Greeks view it, is a reflection or a copy of the divine reality.
As far as this matter is concerned with Euripides, he seems to have serious doubts about the reliability of the cosmic laws and divine justice in connection with moral affairs. He makes his characters’ tragic fates stem almost entirely from their own flawed nature and uncontrolled passions. So chance, disorder and human irrationality frequently result, in Euripides’ tragedies, not in an eventual reconciliation or moral resolution but in apparently meaningless suffering that is looked upon with indifference by the gods, as in the case with Pentheus in *The Bacchae* or Hippolytus in the play of that name. Thus, man is not free. He cannot determine the pattern of events, but is frequently responsible either for the initiation of the evil act or for the release of evil forces latent in a situation.

These ideas of evil, divine wrath and suffering are closely connected with the concept of sin. Sin takes many forms in Greek tragedy such as neglect of gods, the vainglorious overconfidence man expresses in his words or deeds, the refusal to bury the dead, outrage to one’s parents, breaking of oaths, double dealing, and so on. Hubris is one of the main aspects of sin. It is always used in a moral sense, meaning a violation of some divine or human law. Law here means that which is laid down or established; it was the course of nature, the custom of society, and the usages of mankind. Jupiter, with cooperation of the other gods, is the author and executor of these laws; he is their guardian and avenger.

Accordingly, all laws, human and divine alike, are clothed with divine authority and violations of them are sins in the sight of the gods. One of these gods, who is responsible for blinding man’s judgment, is Ate. Ate is considered the external source of folly, madness and blindness. He/she also represents the consequences of the blindness of man; that is his ruin and defeat. In this sense, Ate is sin and suffering, folly and
The Greek tragic plays suggest out of Ate a more appropriate term for expressing the indignation of both men and gods towards those who commit deeds forbidden by the established laws. It is “Nemesis”, which in Greek mythology is:

…the goddess of divine retributive justice or vengeance…, when an evil act brings about its own punishment and a tragic poetic justice prevails. The term is also applied to both an agent and an act of merited punishment. It thus often become synonymous with Fate, although at least a latent sense of justice is almost always associated with the term.40

This means that nemesis is a natural opposition to all that hubris represents. Aeschylus is considered the strongest exponent of this idea. He sees nemesis as a fundamental moral law and part of the divine governance of the world. Sophocles uses it to illustrate the deep underlying moral laws that govern human life. While Euripides uses it as an artistic device to inspire fear and pity.

Another general form of misdeed in Greek tragedies was that of sacrilege. This takes place when immoral and ignorant men desecrate sacred objects or places that belong to gods proper. Agamemnon in Aeschylus’ Agamemnon does that when he walks on the purple carpet at the end of which he suffers his tragic death at the hand of his wife, Clytemnestra. In Antigone, Creon’s refusal to give the dead Polynieces a proper burial, due to the latter’s treachery, is the cause of the tragic conflict between him and Antigone, Polynieces’ sister. Proper burial of the dead was a prerequisite to the soul’s entrance into the underworld. It was regarded as a prime duty upon the closest surviving relatives; in this case Antigone. Denial of such burial was a sacrilege.41
The art of drama developed over the years, and in the Medieval Age, various dramatic forms were presented. The most important of these were Mystery and Morality plays which dealt with the loftiest of subjects in simple but often powerful eloquence. The rise of mysteries can fruitfully be related to a number of traditional, ritualistic, festive and processional activities. The Mystery or Scriptural play is a medieval religious play, based on Biblical history. It originated in the Liturgy of the church and developed from the liturgical dramas into the great cyclic plays.

As for the Morality play, it was a dramatized allegory in which the abstract virtues and vices (like Mercy, Conscience, Evil, Shame etc.) appear in a personified form. The good and the bad usually engaged in a struggle for the soul of a human being. For the Middle Ages, ‘tragedy’ was simply “a story which ended unhappily, offering a warning that, if one were not careful, a final unhappiness would be one’s own lot too.” In a play like *Everyman* (anon. 1500), the theme is the saving of a human being’s soul and the central figure represents humanity in general.

It is noteworthy that the precarious position of man in high state formed the basis for the notion of tragedy in the Renaissance era. This notion owed much to the Latin tragedies of Seneca, which portray the Roman Goddess Fortuna turning her wheel, and thereby bringing low those that were high. This was also the tragic vision of the narrative tales in Boccaccio’s *Falls of Illustrative Men*, Geoffrey Chaucer’s *The Monk’s Tale* in the *Canterbury Tales* (1385) and Lydgate’s *Falls of Princes*. However, while Chaucer and Lydgate had shown how pride, ambition and other worldly sins greased the wheel of fortune, thus leading to a disastrous outcome, the more typical Elizabethan emphasis upon moral responsibility is first reflected in *Mirror for Magistrates* (1559). This was a
collection of English poems from the Tudor period by various authors which retell the
lives and the tragic ends of various historical figures. Here the world of the mighty is
made insecure not by the blind operations of an external force, but by their own
unrestrained lusts or neglect of true allegiance. The Elizabethan tragic dramatists inherit
this precise emphasis on the falls of famous men. However, instead of concentrating on
the outcome of the tragic action as a just punishment of a sinful man, they show a new
interest in the nature and actual working of the tragedy.

2.2 Elizabethan Tragedy

2.2.1 A Historical Background

A considerable number of critics believe that modern drama came into being and also
developed rapidly and brilliantly during the Elizabethan age; therefore, the Elizabethan
era is considered as the golden age of English drama. The Elizabethan were attracted and
enthused by the theatre, which was open to all. As there were neither newspapers nor
novels to be read, the theatre was “the only source of intellectual pleasure.”

When the Elizabethan theatre flowered in the 1580s, England was in the midst of an
economic expansion and national awakening. This means that a wave of change
confronts the Elizabethans on every conceivable level. As a matter of fact, the
Elizabethan era was in most aspects an epoch of change, which affected the individual in
his most basic conceptions. The introduction of new observations, material progress and
metaphysical theories made man’s traditional beliefs about his place in the universe
uncertain.
The outcome of the emergence of these new trends in the Elizabethan age was the establishment of two important movements. The first one is in the field of literature and culture and the second is in religion and theology; namely, Renaissance and Reformation. The Elizabethan theatre which, as a social institution still resembles, as Weimann believes, a “laboratory in which the various elements of society were mixed and worked on,” reflects these changes. 45

The long beginning of the Elizabethan popular theatre, like that of the Greek, lay in religious ceremonies and private entertainment in the halls of the English castles. Moreover, the liturgical dramas, which had often been performed in the two greatest events of the Christian year, Christmas and Easter, helped to establish basic modes of dramatizing the material of sacred history. In fact, Elizabethan tragedy began with a fusion of medieval and classical elements. The high poetic spirit of the mid-sixteenth century began to turn the old medieval forms of morality and mystery plays to new uses and to look to the ancient plays, particularly the lurid tragedies of Seneca for models. The moralists used the plots of the earliest English dramas, which had been acted by members of the clergy in the church, as an example to reinforce the importance of observing Christian values and teachings.

In the religious festivals of the early church, an exchange between two groups of choristers or between a choir and a solo voice led to the idea of dialogue, just as it had in the development of Greek tragedy. Moreover, plays are acted at high speed, without the act and scene breaks we are used to. In addition to that, there is no scenery and very few props. 46 More and more of the Biblical stories are dramatized, much as the material of the Homeric epics that were used by the Greek Tragedians. Hence, cycles of plays are
performed at various religious centers in England, depicting in consequences of short
dramatic episodes the whole human history from the fall of Lucifer and the Creation to
the Day of Judgment.

A number of factors help to formulate the tragic vision of the Elizabethans; the
most important of which is their belief that man forms “the nodal point in the great chain
of being.” 47 This new emphasis on ‘man’ helps to turn the spotlight from God to man
himself in the theatre. This makes the Elizabethan drama, unlike the Greek, a secular one,
interested mainly in man-man relationship instead of God-man relationship. 48

As for the relationship between the individual and the social order, the
Elizabethans staunchly believe in the correspondence between the body politic and the
macrocosm where the order of the state equals that of the macrocosm or the universe, the
king that of the sun, the social classes the hierarchies of the “Great Chain of Being” and
so forth. Casca in *Julius Caesar* thinks that the tempest and the angry winds are
reflections of either a civil war that has started in heaven, or else the world, behaving too
rudely to the gods, has provoked them to send down destruction.

I have seen tempests when the scolding winds,
Have riv’d the knotty oaks, and I have seen
Th’ ambitious ocean swell, and rage, and foam,
To be exalted with the threat’ning clouds,

Either there is a civil strife in heaven,
Or else the world, too saucy with the gods,
Incenses them to send destruction. (I, III)
The Elizabethan tragedies, like their antecedents, are dramatic homilies. Their plots are used as exempla to deliver a moral lesson, and this emphasis on the moral aspects determines their formal characteristics as well as their predilection for certain themes. Thomas Sackville and Thomas Norton’s *Gorboduc* (1562) is the first of these tragedies. Indeed, Gorboduc’s division of his kingdom and the subsequent disorder invites comparison with Shakespeare’s *King Lear*. Furthermore, the play is interesting, first as an attempt at native tragedy for it displays a “healthy independence and a native power of invention,” and second because it is written in blank verse, the unrhymed ten syllable line which was to become the basis of almost all verse drama in England.

Thomas Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy* (1589) continued the tradition of ‘Tragedy of Blood’ with some more sophistication than *Gorboduc* but even more blood-letting. Following the Senecan tragic features, this play was considered the pattern for English revenge tragedy. It had a significant after-effect in its own time, most famously in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*.

It seems suitable at this stage of our discussion to examine the influence that Seneca exerts on the evolution of the Elizabethan tragedy. Seneca (4BC–65AD) is largely responsible for the revival of the Greek tragic tradition for he wrote at least nine tragedies, most of them adaptations of the tragedies of Euripides. In general, Seneca’s plays are marked by their conventional five act division, their use of chorus to comment on the action, the presence of ghosts, the cruel tyrant, the faithful male servant and the female confidant, the presentation of violence of the theme through long narrative reports as a substitute for stage action, the employment of sensational themes drawn from Greek mythology, involving much use of blood and lust connected with unnatural crimes such
as adultery, incest, infanticide, a highly rhetorical style marked by hyperbolic expressions, detailed descriptions, and ‘stichomythia’ (short lines of counterpoised dialogue) and finally, lack of careful character delineation but much use of introspection and soliloquy.  

The other Elizabethan dramatist whose plays show the influence of Seneca is Christopher Marlowe (1564–1593). Kyd and Marlowe’s plays which combined native English tragic tradition with modified Senecan techniques led directly towards the emergence of the typical Elizabethan tragedy. Both dramatists were received by their contemporaries as great originals, inaugurating a new phase of Elizabethan tragedy. Although they reflect some of the Senecan traits in their plays, they do their best to create something new in response to the requirements of the popular Elizabethan stage. As Palmer states, they transform the drama by their invention of the ironic method and by their introduction of a plot-structure in which the final catastrophe is derived from the inner logic of character and situation. The other classical figure whose writings exert a profound impact on various aspects of the Elizabethan age is the Italian political theorist Niccolo Machiavelli. Machiavelli’s political codes, which he expounded in The Prince, were particularly relevant to the Elizabethans as their country suffered from successive internal strife and religious dispute. Italy witnessed the same insecure conditions during the period in which Machiavelli lived. To varying degrees, his dictum that the “end justifies the means” was followed rigorously by the Italian and the English Monarchs alike. As for the tragic dramatists, Machiavellianism gives rise to a new type of tragedy: the tragedy of the hero villain in which the protagonist is blatantly evil, as in Shakespeare’s Richard III and Marlowe’s The Jew of Malta. To sum up, there is an
agreement among modern studies which have shown that the Elizabethan theatre retained many ties with the traditions of the Greek, Latin and the Middle ages as well.

2.2.2 Elizabethan Tragedy: A Structural Approach

Since the Elizabethan dramatists began on a level of close structural and thematic imitation of the classical writers of Greek and Latin, it is appropriate to begin with a discussion of the extent to which the Elizabethan dramatists adhere to the inherited dramatic traditions of the classical writers in constructing their plays. To begin with, one can say that while Aristotle’s *Poetics* does not provide rigid norms for tragedy in England, it does influence the conception of the genre. Particularly important are the Aristotelian principles that the tragic fall should be caused by some error or moral weakness in the characters of the protagonists; that the plot should involve a fall from eminent success into misery marked by reversal and discoveries; that the characters should be persons of high state, and that tragedy should evoke pity and fear in the viewers, working at last to achieve a purgation or catharsis of these emotions. Some of Shakespeare’s great tragedies like *Othello* (1604) and *King Lear* (1606) can be analyzed in such terms, though like most other Elizabethan tragedies, they are far from being classical in their use of subplots and comic relief, their violation of the unities of time and place and their sheer expansiveness.

It is noteworthy that Aristotle’s definition of tragedy is partly similar to A. C. Bradley’s famous interpretation of Shakespearean tragedy. Though it is confined to the analysis of Shakespearean tragedy, Bradley’s discussion could be extended to include the works of other Elizabethan tragic dramatists such as Kyd and Marlowe. In the beginning
of his analysis, Bradley maintains that tragedy is a story of human action leading to
exceptional calamity and ending with the death of a man of a high estate. Shakespearean tragedies often present a conflict which terminates in a catastrophe. This conflict may be divided according to Bradley, into three parts.

The first part is to introduce us into the life and position of persons and their relations to one another, and to leave us keenly interested in the question as to what will come out of this condition of things. The second part deals with the definite beginning, the growth, and the vicissitude of the conflict, i.e. one notices a constant alteration of rises and falls in the tension or emotional pitch of the work; and a regular sequence of more or less exciting sections. As audiences, we can only hope that something will happen that helps to avert the disaster.

The most critical point in the series of events to be presented between the first act and the last one is the climax or the turning point. This crisis, as a rule, comes somewhere near the middle of what seems to be the third of five acts. This point in the development of the plot corresponds roughly to the turning of the wheel of fortune; the outcome of which is the division of the structure into five acts instead of three. These parts show firstly, a situation not yet one of conflict; secondly, the rise and the development of the conflict; thirdly, the crisis which is followed by the fourth part, the decline of one of the two forces and the final part, the catastrophe. *Julius Caesar* is an excellent example here. The first half of the play shows Brutus rising, reaching his height in Act III, Sc. I with the assassination of Caesar. However, later in the same scene, Brutus gives Mark Antony permission to speak at Caesar’s funeral and thus he sets in motion his own downfall, which occupies the second half of the play.
In most of Marlowe’s plays, critics notice a rather different structural pattern. It has been said that *Tamburlaine I* (1587) and *Dr. Faustus* (1588) have a beginning and end but no middle point in the action. Both plays suffer a structural defect for both represent a series of episodes the aim of which is the definition of the central figure. “His plots were weak in construction, being just handfuls of heterogeneous scenes loosely joined together.” Helen Gardner argues that Macbeth’s killing of Duncan, as an example, provides Shakespeare with what Marlowe found so difficult to construct: a proper middle point to both plays. On the other hand, Bradbrook suggests that the plot of both Marlowe’s tragedies might be called ‘cumulative’. In this kind of plot, the same type of incidents are repeated again and again, up to the catastrophe.

The final section of tragedy shows the issue of the conflict in a catastrophe. The tragic plays of Shakespeare usually end in the death not only of the central figure but a considerable number of persons, innocent and guilty alike. Polonius, Ophelia, Desdemona, Macduff’s wife and children, and Coredelia die for no guilt of their own. C.S. Lewis remarks that the Elizabethan dramatist is preoccupied with various sorts of death. The tragic heroes almost always think of death. Lewis believes that death almost constitutes the frame of the tragic picture presented on the stage. For Brutus and Othello, suicide in the high tragic manner is escape and climax; for Lear, death is deliverance; for Romeo and Antony, a poignant loss. For all of them, as for their writer, death is the end. John Bayley’s analysis of the nature of death in Shakespeare’s tragedies is very much part of life, to be lived through and endured as life itself is. He adds that Elizabethan tragic decorum regards death as a ceremony in which all the players participate and are united into a whole.
The discussion of the plot must eventually lead to the delineation of the tragic character whose actions form the main cause of the tragedy. Bradley states that “the tragic hero is usually a good man, certainly one who foresees the qualities of greatness or nobility; in short he is not mean or contemptible. Moreover, the tragic action is concerned always with persons of ‘high degree’, often kings or princes or members of great houses as in *Romeo and Juliet*. Bradley explains the reason behind Shakespeare’s tendency to choose persons of high rank when he points out that “when the hero falls suddenly from the height of earthly greatness to the dust, his fall produces a sense of contrast, of the powerlessness of man and the omnipotence perhaps the caprice of fortune or fate, which no tale of private life can possibly rival.” Moreover, as the plays show, the fate of the tragic character almost always affects the welfare of a whole nation or empire. In short, the tragic heroes in Shakespeare’s tragedies are of exceptional nature and their sufferings and actions are of exceptional nature too.

However, this is not always the case in the Elizabethan theatre. The theatrical practices of Marlowe, as far as his tragic characters are concerned, run contrary to this dictum. Marlowe’s heroes, except in *Edward II*, and *Dido, Queen of Carthage* are men of humble birth. Tamburlaine is a Scythian shepherd and Faustus is a scholar. However, like the other Elizabethan tragic heroes, both are representative of the Renaissance Humanism, which glorifies man and sees in him the human greatness and accomplishment which is the necessary foundation for the tragic heroes of the time.

Thus, the Renaissance interest in the human personality was an important factor in the establishment of the new tragedy of character. Unlike the Greek tragedy which is wholly religious in its nature, Elizabethan tragedy, except for few instances, is secular.
The conflict is almost always between two persons or two groups. The plays of Shakespeare show his belief that man’s character and his conduct are the source of his weal or woe. Craig Hardin argues that Shakespeare invented or perfected the tragedy of character and this is, perhaps, the greatest of his achievements. Shakespeare, he states, is often said to “have established the modern tragedy of character.”

Man’s responsibility for shaping out his life is strongly connected to the question of whether man has an absolute ‘free will’. Aristotle argues that a tragic destiny is precipitated by a ‘tragic flaw’ or an inner frailty in the personality of the tragic hero. In his plays, Shakespeare offers various viewpoints regarding this aspect. Cassius in Julius Caesar says “The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, but in ourselves, that we are underlings” (I, II, 140-1) 65

In King Lear, Edmund ridicules a belief in fortune as the “foppery of the world” (I, II, 128). However, Hamlet in a comment on the nature of hamartia, is fatalistic when he broods on “the mole of nature”, and the “one defect” that some men are born with, “where they are not guilty”, and that brings them to disaster.(I,IV, 24-5) Leech remarks that though the heroes of the Elizabethan tragedy ‘seem’ to enjoy a greater degree of free will than in Greek tragedy, Shakespeare and his contemporaries have gone out of their way to make the audience realize that the pattern is preordained for their characters too. 66

In some of his tragic plays, Shakespeare uses supernatural devices to indicate the course of events as in Macbeth, Julius Caesar and Hamlet. In fact, the entangling events of these plays do suggest that there is only one line of conduct possible for the tragic heroes in the particular situations in which they find themselves. For them it is the doom in the character that determines the end of the play. Hamlet must be killed because he, in
this situation can have no other end. The same is true of Brutus, Othello, King Lear and Richard III. To quote A.C. Bradley, character is destiny.

The most important quality in Shakespeare’s tragic heroes is their “unsuitability” to the action. As a matter of fact, their natures declare themselves through this unsuitability. As such they are often called “miscast” or “misfit”. It is obvious, as Bayley remarks, that a man as sensitive and imaginative as Macbeth is not well suited to the tasks he sets himself to, and that Hamlet has not the temperament for an effective avenger. Moreover, the part of a romantic lover or of one who could love both wisely and well is not ideal for Othello who is black, middle-aged, and possessed of the strongest animal passions.  

In every case, as in the Greek plays, the destructive forces seem to combine inner inadequacies or evil, such as Lear’s temper or Macbeth’s ambition, with external pressures such as Lear’s tiger daughters, the Witches in *Macbeth* or Lady Macbeth’s importunity. Once the destructive course is set going, these forces operate with what the Greeks called ‘Moira’ or ‘Fate’.

It is noteworthy that the Elizabethan tragic plays, unlike the Greek, are not interested in women as tragic characters. Theirs was a male-dominated tragic world. Shakespeare’s tragic female characters are often characterized by submissiveness, weakness and lack of initiative. Lady Macbeth, in G.B. Harrison’s words, is the real cause and the agent of Macbeth’s tragedy, but once her ambition is achieved, she weakens and declines.

The Elizabethan dramatists are also famous for inserting comic elements in their tragic plays, turning them in Philip Sidney’s words, into ‘mongrel tragic-comedies.’ Consequently, the Renaissance stage saw both the clown and king sharing in the effect
and meaning of a single play. “Many times (to make mirth) they make a clown companion with a king; in their grave counsels, they allow the advice of fools, yea, they use one order of speech for all persons, a gross indecorum.” 69 Whetstone adds that in *King Lear* the fool is seen in serious consultation with Lear, and so plays a part in “majestic matters.” The middle part of *Faustus*, in Cunningham’s words, is a strange “rag-bag of serious and ludicrous scraps.” In fact, it consists of comic scenes which turn upon one of Faustus’ servants getting hold of a book of spells and trying to conjure on his own account. These episodes, Cunningham thinks, make “surprisingly good knock-about comedy when acted.” 70

The element of reversal of fortune and discovery is noted in the case of Othello who, too late, discovers the reality of Iago and sees himself as one who has flung away, like an ignorant savage, the priceless jewel of his own happiness. The reversal in *Macbeth* lies in the sorrow that Macbeth’s increased power brings; the recognition comes when he realizes the consequences of his own deeds:

I have lived long enough. My way of life
Is fall’n into the sear, the yellow leaf,
And that which should accompany old age,
As honor, love, obedience … friends,
I must not look to have, but, in their stead,
Curses, not loud but deep…
Which the poor heart would vain deny and dare not.

(V, IV, 22-8)

The other dramatic ingredient, which the Elizabethans inherited from the classical tragic writers, is the chorus which suffers at their hands a drastic change in its quality,
function and personality. The chorus now is no longer a separate body of fifteen members; rather it constitutes a part of the dramatic personae.

In Kyd’s *Spanish Tragedy*, the Ghosts of Andrea and Revenge play the role of the chorus. They do not actually take part in the play, but watch it from the perspective of a passionately interested spectator. The inevitability of fate is continually stressed by Revenge, while the Ghost of Andrea grows increasingly impatient with the protagonist’s hesitation in fulfilling the task of revenge so that he attempts to rouse his partner into action by a passionate speech. The dramatic tension is now at its highest and the “last breathing space before the final catastrophe is very effectively marked.”

Marlowe imitates both Seneca and Kyd in his method of using the chorus. The chorus as a separate entity appears at the beginning of *Tamburlaine I*, *Faustus*, and *The Jew of Malta* to present an exposition of the main situation in the play that will eventually lead to the tragic end of the central figures. Except in *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare employs secondary characters as a chorus. Thus, the Porter in *Macbeth* and the Fool in *King Lear* act as commentators on the action.

Finally, almost all the Elizabethan dramatists show an utter indifference to the unities of time and action as a prerequisite for an ideal tragic plot. This is evident in the sprawling structure of *Tamburlaine I*, and *II*, in Faustus’ ability to travel through time and space, and in the choice of Rome and Egypt as locations in *Antony and Cleopatra*. 
2.2.3 Elizabethan Tragedy: A Thematic Approach

The Elizabethan tragic dramatists, and most notably Shakespeare, did not follow the models of Greek tragedy of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides. Their models were Roman and late-medieval. They deal with a number of themes, the most important of which is revenge. This was due to two main reasons; the first is the influence of the philosopher and the tragic playwright Seneca who wrote ten tragedies during the first century AD, which were translated into English around the time of Shakespeare’s boyhood, and the second reason is the popular tradition that considers revenge as “a kind of wild justice” as Shakespeare’s brilliant contemporary, Francis Bacon called it. Seneca was interested in those subjects which would yield psychological development and which permit a detailed study of passions; namely, ambition, love, and hatred. It is noteworthy that except in cases of fatal error, Seneca’s criminal heroes are fully responsible, for the will to crime is present in them. Indeed, Seneca is convinced that man has a liberty of choice between good and evil. The will is all powerful. This is in agreement with the Machiavellian precepts which place the ‘Will’ at the top of man’s faculties. With varying degrees, Hamlet and Macbeth are defective in will, the former procrastinates and the latter has a moment of atrocious self-torture following each crime he commits. Because Seneca believes that death might be a last refuge and expiation, he sympathizes with suicide when it saves honour or gives an escape from a life too full of pain. Yet, he feels it is more courageous to combat misfortune than to succumb without struggle.
In this sense, Lear, Othello, and Hamlet are Senecan characters for they learn to stand up to fortune’s blows and go out with dignity and a conventional gesture of resignation.

The Elizabethans believe that the right to revenge is not a matter of choice, but a binding obligation in spite of the recurrent emphasis by the religious authorities on the biblical statement: “vengeance is mine saith the Lord.” Due to their interest in revenge as a criminal action, the Elizabethans attempted various analyses of the subsidiary passions which excite it. Anger and hatred are among the first causes and are important in the study of the villain-avengers of the Elizabethan tragedy. Iago in Othello is a case in point here. The chief reason behind his plotting against Othello is the latter’s decision to side-step him military promotion in favour of Cassio.

Jealousy is another prime mover of revenge and murder. Maddened by jealousy, Othello performs the murder of Desdemona as a kind of ritual. In fact, he believes himself an agent of justice who carries out a sacred duty.

Pride and ambition are also considered the forerunners of revenge. The Elizabethan tragic plays reflect a persistent myth of ambition, a myth that entails a tragic paradox. The desire to transcend oneself, to become something greater than one is born to be, is a natural and seemingly noble human tendency; yet it becomes a means of self-destruction, a betrayal of nature and origins that invites primal punishment. This can be noted in King Lear. Proud of his own personal capabilities and being extremely ambitious, Edmund tries to disinherit his half-brother, Edgar, by poisoning their father’s mind against him. Besides these two qualities, ‘envy’ was perhaps considered the greatest vice and one of the most powerful of the passions inducing revenge. Cassius, out of malicious personal
envy of Caesar, persuades Brutus and other Roman nobles to assassinate their benefactor, Caesar.

Elizabethan revenge tragedy properly begins with Kyd’s masterpiece *Spanish Tragedy* which deals with the sacred duty of a father to avenge the murder of his son. Accordingly, the tragedy of revenge is “a distinct species of the tragedy of blood…a tragedy whose leading motive is revenge, leading to the death of the murderers and often the death of the avenger himself.” Since ‘revenge’ results from committing an evil act, an investigation of forms of evil presented in the Elizabethan tragic plays will be attempted here.

Tillyard sees tragedy as a picture of life disturbed by the intrusion of a disruptive evil force, the apparent triumph of that force, and then the reassertion of a normality which has been strengthened through trial. As far as Shakespeare’s tragedies are concerned, Bradley believes that the main source of the convulsion which produces suffering and death is never good. It is almost always evil in the fullest sense of the word, not mere imperfection but plain moral evil. Evil in *King Lear, Macbeth, Hamlet* and *Julius Caesar* takes the form of a violation of a natural order, the outcome of which is destruction not only on the personal level but also on the public one as well. Lear’s division of his kingdom between his two daughters was a foolish act that shows his lack of understanding and wisdom. Having violated a natural law, Lear should be punished. This punishment helps Lear to realize his mistake and to acquire self-knowledge though this, unfortunately, cannot be done except by the most violent methods. This recalls the Greek principle ‘Learning through suffering’ and makes *King Lear* the most fatalistic, the most Aeschylean and the most heathen of Shakespeare’s tragedies.
Macbeth defines a particular kind of evil that results from a lust for power. In none of his other plays, has Shakespeare explored more fully and deeply the nature and effects of evil. It is portrayed in the action, in the dark oppressive images which convey the impression of evil as a “palpable substantial presence” and in the character, most obviously that of Lady Macbeth. The forces of evil, which are unleashed by Macbeth and his wife gradually, spread from them to possess the whole kingdom.

This situation gives rise to two important themes in the play: the first is the theme of the reversal of values, which the first scene states simply and clearly ‘Fair is foul and foul is fair’ (I, I, 11) and with it are associated premonition of conflict, disorder, and moral darkness into which Macbeth will plunge himself. The second is the theme of deformation of a man through his own insistence on committing unnatural acts. Macbeth’s is neither an act committed by mistake nor an error of judgment. His act is, in Helen Gardner’s opinion, an error of the will.

In fact, the act is so unnatural that it deforms the nature that performs it. In this respect, W.C. Curry remarks that “in proportion as the good in [Macbeth] diminishes, his liberty of free choice is determined more and more by evil inclination and he cannot choose the better course.” This feeling of the irreversibility of the course of evil makes Macbeth live a mood of existential despair that finds its expression in his realization that:

Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player,
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury
Signifying nothing. (V, V, 24-8)
This makes the entire play a “study of absurdity with three of its central themes: the sterility of roles divorced from actions; alienation from roles and meaninglessness of the world whose order is observed only in ritual.” 82

The theme of the violation of natural order is closely connected with the concept of the ‘Divine Right of kings’, which the Elizabethans strongly believed in. In the sixteenth century, the authority of the king was believed to be derived from God. This belief was inherited from the medieval view that a king was to be seen as God’s deputy on earth and this was in fact useful to the Tudors, since their original claim to the throne, after the Wars of Roses, was disputed. According to this, political order in the state mirrored the natural order of the cosmos. 83 In Defence of the Right of Kings, James I declares that kings are the “breathing images of God upon earth.” 84 As such, defiance of them is a defiance of God’s will. The Elizabethan tragic plays present the outcome of this defiance in the form of violent bloody deeds as in Hamlet and Macbeth; civil war as in Julius Caesar and disorder in Nature and in the lives of men as in King Lear.

Evil in Marlowe’s tragic plays takes the form of “overweening pride” or “misdirected desires”. One of the recurrent themes in these plays is that of the man of humble birth aspiring to higher things. His heroes are “overreachers” in the sense that they are extremely ambitious. To express his idea of the dangers of aspiring too high and rebellion against the established order, Marlowe chooses three classical figures: Icarus, Hercules, and Prometheus. Icarus, as Harry Levin in Leech’s Marlowe points out is the archetype of the overreacher. Like Icarus, Marlowe’s heroes rebel against the restrictions imposed by the established systems of their own time. Tamburlaine’s ambition has no
The main theme of *Tamburlaine I* is the power and splendour of human will, which restlessly endeavours to glorify its desires. Like the Promethean Tamburlaine, Faustus rebels against the traditional beliefs of his time. Faustus’ first sin is of pride, the pride of man who dares to think that he can order his destiny for himself, and ignore or trick fate. The Icarus image used in the prologue to *Faustus*, suggests that there is a soaring mounting movement before the fall. Faustus had been granted “learning’s golden gifts” to the limits of human capacity and had abused them by turning to the “cursed necromancy” in order to acquire more treasures.

It is noteworthy that in almost all Elizabethan tragedies, especially Shakespeare’s plays, villainy never remains victorious and prosperous at the last. The life presented in Shakespeare’s, major tragedies is one which contends against evil as it would against poison, struggles against it in agony and eventually casts it forth, though it must rend itself in so doing and must tear out much good along with the evil.

The catastrophe, which befalls the tragic hero who is, by nature, a good man, gives one the dominating impression of waste. Furthermore, Bradley maintains that in Shakespeare’s plays, all human activity takes place in a world that has as its predominating features a moral order that is good. The order of the tragic universe, Bradley observes, shows itself akin to good and alien to evil.

Finally, the most important cause of the Elizabethan and more specifically of Shakespeare’s tragic heroes’ downfall is their passion. The lovers’ passionate rashness in *Romeo and Juliet*, Brutus’ self-deluding idealist approach to life, Macbeth’s
overweening ambition, and Othello’s credulous trust in appearances result in their deaths. Meanwhile, the tragedies of Marlowe are seen to be the result of “uncontrolled, misdirected and diseased passion.” This passion is translated into unnatural thirst for power, wealth, political authority and mastery of the world.

2.3 The Eclipse of Tragedy

From Shakespeare’s tragedies to the closing of theatres in England by the Puritans in 1642, the quality of tragedy steadily declines if the best of the Greek and Shakespearean tragedies are taken as a standard.

Among the leading dramatists of the period are: John Webster, Thomas Middleton, Francis Beaumont, John Fletcher, Cyril Tourneur, and John Ford. The Jacobean dramatists, those whose works flourished during the reign of James I were obsessed by death. They become superb analysts of moral confusion and of the darkened vision of humanity at cross purposes, preying upon itself, of lust, hate, and intrigue engulfing what is left of beauty, love, and integrity.

As a result, periods of creation of high tragedy were few and short lived. The inevitable materials of tragedy such as violence, hate and lust etc., lose their symbolic role and became perverted to the uses of melodrama and sensationalism and mixed for relief with the broadest comedy or farce.

Twenty nine years after the closing of the theater, John Milton attempted to bring back the classical spirit and tone of tragedy which he called “the gravest and most profitable of all other poems.” His *Samson Agnoistes* (1671) is modeled on the legend of Prometheus. It recalls Aeschylus’ tragedy, both in its form, in which the immobilized
hero receives a sequence of visitors and in its theme, in which there is resurgence of the hero's spirit under stress.

After the vicissitudes of the Civil War, John Dryden tried to revitalize the tragic form by writing *All for Love* (1678) in blank verse as a re-working of the legendary love of Antony and Cleopatra. The play fails to inspire us. Instead of Shakespeare’s worldwide panorama, and his rapid shifts of scene and complex characters, we have the last hours of the tragic lovers presented according to the unities of time, place and action in a neatly symmetrical plot. Dryden described his attempt as follows:

The death of Anthony and Cleopatra is a subject which has been treated by the greatest Wits of our Nation, after Shakespeare; and by all so variously, that their example has given me the confidence to try myself in this Bowe of Ulysses amongst the crowd of suitors; and, withal, to take my own measures, in aiming at the mark. I doubt not but the same motive has prevailed with all of us in this attempt; I mean the Excellency of the moral: for the chief persons represented, were famous patterns of unlawful love; and their end accordingly was unfortunate.

In spite of the large number of plays, which their authors called tragedies, the form as the Greeks and the Elizabethans have defined it went into eclipse during the late seventeenth, eighteenth and the early part of the nineteenth centuries. Reasons that have been suggested for the decline include: the politics of the Restoration; the rise of science and with it, the optimism of the Enlightenment throughout Europe; the developing middle-class economy; the trend towards reassuring deism in theology and in literature, the rise of the novel and the vogue of satire.
The genius of the age was discursive and rationalistic. Moreover, the belief in evil was reduced to perception of evil which was looked upon as institutional and therefore remediable. Those who felt themselves called upon to write tragedies produced little but weak imitation. Percy Bysshe Shelley tried it once in *The Cenci* (1819). However, his optimistic concept of tragedy may be better seen in *Prometheus Unbound* (1820) in which Zeus is overthrown and man enters upon a golden age, ruled by the power of love.

It was not until the second half of the nineteenth century, with the plays of the great European writers- Henrik Ibsen from Norway, Antoine Checkov from Russia and August Strindberg from Sweden that something of the vision returned to inspire the tragic theatre. These dramatists presented “the conflict between the alienated individual, who aspires to some alternative world of the imagination, and narrow social conventions, designed to crush such aspirations.”

On the other side, bourgeois tragedy came into being as a form that was developed in the 18th century. It comes as a fruit of the Enlightenment and the emergence of the bourgeois class and its ideals. George Lillo’s *The London Merchant* which was first performed in 1731 is considered as the first true bourgeois tragedy.

### 2.4 Conclusion

Aristotle’s *Poetics* is considered the most important and valuable critical study of classical tragedy in ancient time. It is noteworthy that the *Poetics* was written after the death of the masters of Greek Tragedy, namely: Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides. This implies the absence of theoretical framework according to which they could have written tragic plays. Nevertheless, they were capable of presenting unique works of
tragedy. Aristotle speaks of tragedy as it had been developed up to his time in Greece, rather than of an everlasting and invariable type of drama. In generalizing about the nature of tragedy, he speaks of optimal approaches rather than of absolutes.

In classical tragedy, the tragic situation, in which the characters find themselves, is always a situation in which man seems to be deprived of all outward help and is forced to rely entirely on himself. It is often a situation of extraordinary tension and utmost conflict. Studying the plots of a number of Greek tragedies, one can find variation of two basic tragic situations; either the case of man’s miscalculation of reality which brings about the fatal outcome or the case of a man facing the necessity of choosing between two duties, both of which claim fulfillment. Furthermore, the result of the hero’s choice or deed affects not only his life and future but also of those around him.

Fate, in Greek tragedy, takes the form of an invisible power, which is personified by the gods. Man’s violation of the divine laws dictated by gods due to his overweening pride often results in suffering. This is what makes a Greek tragedy so awe-inspiring to watch.

On the other hand, the Elizabethan tragedy retained many ties with the traditions and the plays of their predecessors, the Latins and the native drama of the Middle Ages with a certain perspective back to the Greeks and Aristotle and his criteria of tragedy. They were able to present their own new conception of tragedy in terms of form and content. Besides what they inherited from their forerunners, they use and add new techniques and themes such as subplots, comic relief and the violation of unities of time and place. They enhanced the complexity of the conflict and the catastrophe that sometimes leads to the death not only of the central character but also to a considerable
number of persons around him. The subjects and the concepts were secular; concerned with man–man relationship coloured by love, hatred, revenge…etc. As such, the Elizabethan age is considered to be a milestone in the development of the concept of tragedy in the art of drama.
End Notes


7. S.P. Sen Gupta, p. 70.


9. Rebecca Bushnell, p. 35.


27. T.S. Dorsch, p. 52.


29. M. C. Bowra, p. 10.

30. Clifford Leech, p. 70.


38. Werner Jaeger, p. 266.


43. Clifford Leech, p. 15.


47. E.M.W. Tillyard, *The Elizabethan World Picture*, (London: Chatto & Windows,
1943) p. 83.


51. Rebecca Bushnell, p. 67.


55. A.C. Bradley, p. 3-6.


60. M.C. Bradbrook, *Themes and Conventions of Elizabethan Tragedy*, (Cambridge:


63. A.C. Bradley, p. 5.

64. Alfred Harbage, p. 11.


67. John Bayley, p. 64.

68. G.B. Harrison, p. 188.


70. John E. Cunningham, p. 48.


75- Fredson Bowers, p. 63.


77. A.C. Bradley, p. 25.


81. Alfred Harbage, p. 102.

82. Stanford M. Lyman & Martin B. Scott, p. 8.

83. Jennifer Wallace, p. 44.


85. M.C. Bradbrook, p. 137.


