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Contours of Poetry in the Tragedies of William Shakespeare and Thomas Hardy

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Abstract: The objective of this proposal is to trace and prove the presence of poetry and critically examine its nature in the climax and denouement episodes of William Shakespeare's play *Othello* and Thomas Hardy's novel *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. To sustain and analyze this further, the essay takes into account the study of Aristotle's *The Poetics*, T. S. Eliot's *A Dialogue on Dramatic poetry* and *Poetry and Drama*, Edith Brugmans's *Poetry in the novels of Iris Murdoch*, Sarah Minsloff's *Losing the Margin: Poetry and Poetic Form in the Victorian Novel* and Alberto Moravia's *Poetry and the Novel*. The proposal furthers into the domains of poetic drama and poetic fiction to prove that poetry, across form and genre, is an inherently essential element in the climax and denouement episodes of tragedies like *Othello* and *The Mayor of Casterbridge*.

Key words: Poetry, verse drama, verse novel and dramatic poetry, tragedy.

Introduction: The paper looks to prove the presence of poetry in the climactic and denouement episodes of William Shakespeare's play *Othello* and Thomas Hardy's novel *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. Since a fair deal of studies have been done regarding verse drama and verse novel as separate genres, less has been done about tracing the presence of poetry explicitly or implicitly present in the climax or denouement episodes of a tragic drama as well as a tragic novel at the same time, thus, bringing together three major genres in the present study with poetry being the mutual presence straddling the domains of both drama

and novel. Informed by the concepts of verse drama and verse novel, this project looks to prove the presence of poetry as an essential element in the climax and denouement episodes of a tragic drama as well as a tragic novel.

Such study seems more viable in case of tragedy rather than comedy as an excavating ground for poetry mainly for five reasons; first, the Aristotelean theory of poetics recognizes the unity between poetry and tragedy (drama); second, both *Othello* and *The Mayor of Casterbridge* satisfies the Aristotelean concept of tragedy and therefore the notion of poetry as a natural association with a tragic novel becomes an evident idea worth its salt; third, not only drama but also novel is a suitable genre for tragedy as in case of *Othello* and *The Mayor of Casterbridge*; fourth, the presence of poetry in a drama or in a novel makes drama or novel hybrid and elastic; fifth, this hybridity helps one genre to inform the other and vice versa i.e. drama, prose and poetry informs one another to the emotional adaptability of the readers. In this way this paper may help to appreciate the presence of poetry in drama or novel in a better way and envisages to see a pronounced presence of poetry in drama or novel as a future inevitability for tragedy as a genre.

Historical Reception of verse drama and verse novel: The proposed title of the paper has its roots in the traditions of verse drama and verse novel. Verse drama as a genre has existed in European as well in non-European cultures. Greek tragedy, the plays of Racine, Shakespeare, Ben Jonson and John Fletcher were all written in verse. Aristotle's *Poetics* written in the fourth century BC is a dramatic theory in which he discusses tragedy and epic poetry, further linking poetry to drama.

T. S. Eliot's works and his essays proved landmark achievements in the direction of reviving the genre of verse drama though Centuries later, except for the Romantics and the Victorians who witnessed efforts to revive verse drama by bringing poetry back to theatre. His essay *A Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry and Poetry and Drama* in 1928 is a critical

endorsement of how he articulated the genre of verse drama through his works like *Murder in the Cathedral*, *The Family Reunion* and others.

Verse novel, on the other hand, is a literary paradox and has not been received constructively and doubts have been raised about its legitimacy as a genre which is an oxymoron in itself. Its recent roots go back to the nineteenth century in the west however it predates this timeframe to antiquity and further in the twentieth century reclaimed popularity. Dino Felluga maintains that it was in 1860s that the genre of verse novel consolidated as a hybrid form rather than an arch-generic entity considered to be antagonistic as novel and poetry.

The other critical essay my title is predicated upon is Edith Brugman's *Poetry in the novels of Iris Murdoch*. In line with Brugman's essay this essay attempts to classify and interpret the presence of poetry in the denouement of Thomas Hardy's tragic novel *The Mayor of Casterbridge*.

The critical works and books as mentioned above look at *Othello* and *The Mayor of Casterbridge* through the conceptual angularities of verse drama and verse novel and aims to find poetry in the climax of the play and the denouement of the novel. It does not categorize or pigeonhole the play and the novel into watertight generic compartments of verse drama and verse novel rather it takes these generic conceptions by the pinch of salt applies it to the demarcated episodes of the climax and the denouement and appreciates it critically through critics and writings of both genres and attempts to reach on a conclusion that poetry is present in the climax of a tragic play *Othello* and the denouement of a tragic novel *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. This is the primary concern or objective of the essay.

Whereas, by extension, the essay also holds a universal promise beyond its primary concern: the promise that poetry owing to its nature of holding gravitas is a tantalizing force

and naturally becomes a partner explicit or implicit in the affairs of literature beyond genres. It is so also because poetry is not so much a frequented genre as novel and drama.

Main Body of the essay: Literature whether poetry, prose and drama, holds man at the centre, in the same way feelings, speech and action or performativity are essential to human beings. Man is a social and a cultural being and almost every important stage or affair of human beings whether it is birth, marriage, death or festivities are marked by poetry. It seems inherently essential to humans. Can it not be said of poetry to be universal in nature? and as a genre doesn't it enjoy a license and prerogative to be an imminent force in different genres and particularly in tragedy that imitates some serious actions leading to conflicts which calls for the elusive harmony?

Does poetry not seem to be a climactic luxury for both a celebration and a solace whereas prose and drama create suitable circumstances at the backdrop to culminate in poetry? If literature is an argument, poetry seems to be its crescendo for without poetry human beings cannot attain harmony through rhythm that is the practical common goal of human affairs of which literature is a mimesis and literature must reflect this concern structurally too that the essay aims to trace in climactic or denouement episodes of tragedies like *Othello* and *The Mayor of Casterbridge*.

Doesn't a cathartic experience seem to have its utmost impact on audiences or readers when communicated through poetry? Does the protagonist not find poetry to be a handy medium to express his or her anxiety and agony of the world? Isn't poetry the best medium of expression for King Lear, the Macbeths, Hamlet and Richard the third when they are in trance like situations of turmoil? and similarly can't poetry serve Othello and Henchard better to express their angst and crisis? What should be the ideal genre for the crisis induced convulsions of the protagonist's psyche? Poetry appears to be the prospective answer to me.

so what? How is it viable? It is subject to examination and analysis on the basis of critics and texts mentioned above.

To begin with Aristotle, poetry is the imitative use of language. he defines poetry as tragedy, comedy, epic poetry, poetry and music as well. It is mimetic and it is natural for humans to return to it because it is the representation of objects and events around us. He recognizes tragedy as the most refined form of poetry. It has rhythm and harmony, epic poetry uses hexameter while tragedy uses other forms of meter to achieve the rhythm of character's speech, so poetry and tragedy are connected.

T. S. Eliot's theory and practice of poetic drama is based upon Dryden's tradition of poetic drama. Regarding the unity between tragedy and poetry, Eliot has famously noted about Shakespeare's theatre that "the same plays are the most poetic and the most tragic and this not by a concurrence of two activities, but by the full expansion of one and the same activity. I agree that the tragic dramatist who is not a poet is so much the less a tragic dramatist." His essay on dramatic poetry and poetry of drama insists that all great poetry is dramatic, there exists dramatic element in great poetry and there is poetic element in great drama. His most fundamental theory is that we cannot isolate poetry from drama.

Again, this also applies to the dramatic monologues of Tennyson and Browning. In this context Othello, Eliot, Tennyson and Browning seem identical and important to carry on this paper's attempt. Doesn't the climax episode of *Othello* in which Othello strangulates Desdemona seem to be a thematic as well as a generic inspiration for Robert Browning's *Porphyria's Lover* in which the lover strangles his beloved Porphyria. Metaphysical poets too had dramatic opening as one of its features.

Eliot insists that all great poetry is dramatic, there exists dramatic element in great poetry and there is poetic element in great drama. He further points out that "if our verse is to have so wide a range that it can say anything that has to be said, it follows that it will not be

‘poetry’ all the time. It will only be ‘poetry’ when the dramatic situation has reached such a point of intensity that poetry becomes the natural utterance, because then it is the only language in which the emotions can be expressed at all. Both these elements of dramatic poetry and the situation of great intensity is visible in Othello’s speech:

“It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul.

.....

“Put out the light, and then put out the light.

If I quench thee, thou flaming minister,

It strikes where it doth love. She wakes”. (Act V, Scene II)

Othello naturally becomes a poet out of intensity of situations and what he utters is poetry and not an everyday language. The intensity of situation calls for an appropriate mental and dramatic tonal equivalent which manifests itself through images, dramatic monologue and poetry suggesting that actions of greater repercussions make Othello a poet of high drama and poetry merging together. Poetry becomes the best medium for the expression of intense emotions. A domestic tragedy of Desdemona and Othello who is a violent moor with sexual jealousy and doubts kills her but keeps poetry alive while doing so.

The novel ends with Henchard’s last will which Harold Bloom cites as the most “eloquent of all Hardy’s Writing”. Since Henchard’s will is profusely charged with pathos of anonymity after death it echoes the pessimistic attitude of the age as reflected in Matthew Arnold’s poetry. Henchard’s will signifies the non-existent hope and infinite despair as we see in Arnold’s *Dover Beach*. Henchard’s will in the novel seems to be on par with Arnold’s *Dover Beach* in terms of pessimistic tone and attitude and therefore doesn’t there seem to be a possibility of worthy comparison between a passage of novel and *Dover Beach*?

Secondly, Henchard’s will in the novel is equally remarkable for its simplicity of language where Wordsworth’s theory poetry and its language applies. According to

Wordsworth poetry should be written in everyday language. Henchard will as a tragic hero of the novel is simple and eloquent.

Edith Brugmans's *Poetry in the novels of Iris Murdoch* is an essay that offers an attempt to text mine Murdoch's use of poetry in her novel, interprets its nature and leads to a conclusion that her novels profess a force of ethics and morality. There are different kinds of poetic utterances. Consider this plain prose in Murdoch's *The Sea, The Sea* which turns poetical with beautiful words and fine rhythms in a passage describing Charles Arrowby's midsummer night on the rocks: "As I lay there listening to the soft slap of the sea.....sound of singing." Similarly, Jeremy Tambling one of the critics of Charles Dickens finds unconscious poetics in his portrayal of the urban. Tambling's reason to call Dickens' novels poetry is that "they are an "excess in the mode of prose statements".

Ezra Pound defines poetry on the basis of the treatment of the language i.e., "the language of prose is much less highly charged that is perhaps the only availing distinction between prose and poetry." For T. S. Eliot, it is "a concentration, and a new thing resulting Pritam 4 from that concentration, of a great number of experiences." And the theory of T. S. Eliot that all great poetry is dramatic, all these definitions and attributes of poetry can be found in the concluding scene of *The Mayor of Casterbridge* where the protagonist Henchard leaves a will after his tragic death:

MICHAEL HENCHARD'S WILL

"That Elizabeth-jane Farfrae be not told of my death, or made to grieve on account of me.

And that I be not bury'd in consecrated ground.

And that no sexton be asked to toll the bell.

And that no body is wished to see my dead

body....

And that no body remember me.”

To this I put my name.

Michael Henchard

The above-mentioned monologue like will is a highly charged not obviously with metaphors but with tragic pathos, a concentration from different experiences of his life and obviously dramatic but wanting in the evocation of images. Can it not be considered poetry? Can it not be called poetry?

In light of the above-mentioned critics and books, the project of finding the presence of poetry in the tragedies of William Shakespeare and Thomas Hardy becomes a bit apparent. While T. S. Eliot’s concept of dramatic poetry asserts a strong unity between poetry and drama, Jonson finds well-tuned and true-filed lines in Othello, Ezra Pound distinguishes poetry from prose on the basis of the treatment of language that is highly charged in poetry and with Eliot again pointing out verse to be a suitable medium for the expression of heightened intensity of emotion even in drama, poetry seems to be a transcending genre.

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