Shakespearean Tragedy: The Elements of a Tragedy

Element 1: The Tragic Hero
1. Usually there is only one tragic hero
2. Only Great Men are Tragic Heroes
   - Peasants because they are human beings do not inspire pity and fear as great men do.

   For example: The pangs of despised love and the anguish of remorse are the same in a peasant as in a prince. However, a peasant’s emotional distress will not affect the welfare of a nation or empire. So, when a great man falls suddenly from the heights of earthly greatness, his fall produces a sense of contrast.

3. Common Qualities of the Tragic Hero
   - Tragic heroes are exceptional persons, born into a high estate. Yet, the tragic hero’s nature typically raises him in some respect much higher than the average level of humanity.
     - The tragic hero carries a touch of greatness (e.g., fierce determination, fixed ideas, which stirs not only sympathy and pity, but also admiration, terror, and awe).
   - Tragic heroes need not to be “good,” although they generally are.
     - Shakespeare’s tragic heroes project that man is not small or contemptible, no matter how rotten he can be.
   - Tragic heroes contribute to their own destruction by acts in which the reader sees a flaw in their character; this flaw often takes the form of obsession.
     - The difficulty is that the audience must desire the defeat/destruction of the tragic hero, but this in itself does not constitute tragic feeling.
   - Tragic heroes illustrate the center of the tragic impression: the sense of waste.
     - Shakespeare’s tragic heroes live for what seems to be a type of the mystery of the whole world. Shakespeare tries to show the reader the tragedy that is all around and the waste that it creates.

Element 2: The Tragic Flaw
1. Hamartia (Greek)-1. In a tragedy, the quality within the Tragic Hero/Heroine that leads to his or her downfall. May be viewed in terms of a weakness of character, some moral blindness, or error.
   - The flaw often takes the form of obsession.

Element 3: The Tragic “Story”
1. Plot
   - The tragic story leads up to, and includes, the death of the hero.
   - The suffering and calamities that befalls the hero are unusual and exceptionally disastrous.

2. Explanation of the Calamity
   - Who: The suffering befalls to a conspicuous person.
   - What: The suffering is itself of a striking kind.
   - When: The suffering, as a rule, is unexpected.
   - Why: The suffering, as a rule, contrasts with previous happiness and/or glory.
3. Tragedy, Human Flaws, and Responsibility
   🎨 The calamities of a tragedy do not simply happen, nor are they sent.
   🎨 The calamities of tragedy proceed mainly from actions, and those, the action of men.
   🎨 Shakespeare's tragic heroes are responsible for the calamity of their falls.
   o The center of the tragedy, therefore, lies in the action issuing from the character, of flawed perceptions, and human frailty for which the hero is ultimately responsible.
   o The hero recognizes his own responsibility for the calamity too late to prevent his own death.

Element 4: The Abnormal, The Supernatural, Fate/Fortune/Chance

1. Shakespeare occasionally represents abnormal conditions of mind: insanity, hallucinations etc.
   🎨 The abnormal conditions of the mind are never introduced as the origin of any deeds of any dramatic moment.
2. Shakespeare also introduces the supernatural: ghosts and witches who have supernatural knowledge.
   🎨 The supernatural elements cannot be explained away as an illusion in the mind of one of the characters.
   🎨 The supernatural does contribute to the action, but always placed in the closest relation with the character.
   🎨 The supernatural gives a confirmation and a distinct form to inward movements already present and exerting an influence: to the half-formed thought or the memory of guilt or suspicion.
3. Shakespeare, in most tragedies, allows “chance” in some form to influence some of the action because chance is a prominent feature in life.
   🎨 Men may start a course of events, but can neither calculate nor control the outcome; is a tragic fact.
   🎨 However, any large use of chance would weaken the sense of the casual connection of character, deed, and calamity.

Element 5: Tragic Conflicts

1. General Point: The action of the protagonist/tragic hero is most often motivated by external and internal conflicts, which lead to complications from which further conflicts arise- all in a kind of snowballing effect, driving the action toward a tragic resolution.

2. External Conflict
   🎨 Usually, there are two persons, of whom the hero is one
   🎨 Two Parties or Groups, one of which the hero leads
   🎨 The passions, tendencies, ideas, principles, forces, which animate these persons or groups

3. Internal Conflict
   🎨 Shakespeare’s tragic hero, though he pursues his fated way, is, at some point, torn by an inward struggle.
   o The conception of outer and inner struggle includes the action of “spiritual forces”
   o The “spiritual forces” generating the internal turmoil for the hero is the combination of the pressures of the external and internal struggles or conflicts.
Element 6: The Tragic Pattern

- **Our Hero:** A Man Of High Estate
- **A Chink In His Armor:** Fatal Flaw In His Character Is Exposed
- **Tick. Tock. Chaos Rocks:** An Intrusion Of Time & A Sense Of Urgency
- **All by Myself:** Gradual Isolation of Our Hero
- **In A Blaze Of Glory:** Last Courageous Attempts To Restore Lost Honor & Greatness
- **Mon Dieu! What Have I Done?** Tragic Recognition By Our Hero Of His Fatal Flaw, But Too Late.
- **Hmm! Do(n't) See:** Misreadings & Rationalizations Plague Our Hero
- **He Could Have a Contender:** Audience Recognizes Hero’s Potential for Greatness
- **Death Of Our Hero:** “From the great deep to the great deep he goes.” Tennyson
- **And After Great Storms, Great Calm Comes:** Restoration of Order & Balance

Element 7: Tragic Structure Drama

**Gustave Freytag’s Dramatic Pyramid**

- **Exposition:** Consists of early material providing the theme, establishing the setting, and introducing the major characters and sometimes early hints of the coming conflict.
- **Rising Action:** An increase in tension or uncertainty developing out of the conflict the protagonist faces.
- **Climax:** Traditionally situated in the third act of a play, the climax is the moment of greatest tension, uncertainty, or audience involvement. The climax is also called the outcome.
- **Falling Action:** At some point after the reversal, the tragic hero realizes or understands his tragic error. This moment of tragic recognition is called the anagnorisis.
- **Resolution:** During the falling action, the earlier tragic error causes the falling fortunes of the hero. This culminates in the final catastrophe and involves catharsis (emotional exhaustion) in the audience.
- **The Structure of Tragedy:**
  - **Inciting Moment**
  - **Moment of Last Suspense**
  - **Catastrophe**
  - **The Structure of Tragedy**

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