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Tragedy and Sidney's Idea of "The Uncertainty of this World."

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Abstract

Sir Philip Sidney claims in *The Defense of Poesy* that tragedy "teacheth the uncertainty of this world." This argument will be examined in three major tragedies: Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, William Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *King Lear*. There is an aspect of risk in these tragedies that is uncertain and has no measurable likelihood. Uncertainty in these works can range from a lack of certainty to an almost complete lack of definite information, especially about the outcome or consequence of a main character's action or a main character in the job in question makes a decision. In the majority of instances, it seems as if nothing was planned ahead of time. If any of the main characters in the titles I listed above knows the result of his or her decision in advance, he or she will not make it.

In my article, I'll show how the main characters' decisions have repercussions in their lives and have an effect on their future.

Keywords: Tragedy, Uncertainty, *Doctor Faustus*, *King Lear*, and *Antony and Cleopatra*

Introduction

In *The Defense of Poesy* (c. 1579-84), Sir Philip Sidney claims that tragedy "teacheth the uncertainty of this world" (118). This is an objective examination of tragedies such as Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* (c. 1588-9), William Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* (c. 1606-7), and *King Lear* (c. 1605-6). There is an aspect of risk in these tragedies that is uncertain and has no measurable likelihood. Uncertainty in these works may range from a falling short of certainty to an almost complete lack of definite knowledge especially about an outcome or result of an action or a main character in the job in question makes a decision. In the majority of instances, it seems as if nothing was planned ahead of time. If any of the main characters in the titles I listed above knows the result of his or her decision in advance, he or she will not make it. In the following pages, I will attempt to examine the three tragedies mentioned above and how each "teacheth the uncertainty of this world."

Text and Argument

In Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, *Doctor Faustus* thinks that he will have the power he dreams of, but he does not pay attention to the fact that the power he is looking for is a ruse, a cloaked force with limits and an end. In other words, he is focused on the here

and now, and is unconcerned about the long-term implications of his decision. It's not shocking that, in the end, he's a Renaissance man who has been duped by his blind faith in his world's strength.

Faustus is enthralled by the rapid growth of knowledge in his time and full of pride in the human mind's strength. This power is countered by the Christian faith where man's knowledge and power are nothing in comparison to God's. Faustus does what the devils have done; he rejects God's supremacy, and challenges God's grace for knowledge and power. However, he is unaware that this rejection and challenge would lead to his downfall. He is self-deceived; he becomes unaware of the reality and certainty of his situation. He would not give his soul for a trifle if he does not have to. Who can believe that a great German philosopher sinks to the level of petty tricks, and finally consoles himself by conjuring up Helen of Troy—who is really only a devil in disguise?

In reality, Faustus arrives at truths—the limits of his intelligence and power—at the start of the play, which he sets out in front of himself for inspection. These truths elicit new questions and contradictions in him as a Renaissance man. The voice of doubt and irresolution has taken the place of argument for a clear strategy or learned sequences in his speeches and soliloquies. We follow a Renaissance man's soliloquy of doubt and confusion through the play before the moment of justice arrives. At this moment, we have a true soliloquy, the utterance of a tragic hero who gains self-knowledge at the moment when he has no chance to correct his mistakes:

*The devil will come, and Faustus must be damn'd.
Or, I'll leap up to my God! —Who pulls me down?
(XIX. 151-52).*

This quote demonstrates how this man has never considered this situation before.

In any case, his pride transforms to frustration in the end because he has squandered his time in indecision. His life and death serve as a warning to a man torn between two worlds: Renaissance pride and Christian faith, a man who adopts, follows, and lives one world, ignorant of the consequences of his choice. Faustus' misfortune is that his ambitions overtake him to the point that he loses sight of his real condition. He deceives and dramatizes himself to the point that he is left with nothing but disappointment at the end. If he knows or expects from the beginning that this will be his end, he would not carry out such an action.

To condense a long story, Faustus starts by expressing trust in his ability to control time and ends by expressing his desire to keep it on track: "That time may cease, and midnight never come" (XIX. 44). In fact, Faustus' moral nature is more complicated than that of any Renaissance man, and it is out of it that he spins the thread of his unplanned, uncertain tragic fate.

Another tragedy that teaches the uncertainty of this world is William Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*. In this play, we find the characters' lack of definite knowledge about any sequences of their decisions and actions. What seems certain and planned in Rome turns out to become uncertain and happens naturally in Egypt. Rome is seen and represented as careful, orderly, and depicting conquest from the beginning of the tragedy, while Egypt portrays fertility, joy, and love. The reader will expect the play to end in the same way it started, reinforcing this point. But what happens is something else where the Egyptian Queen becomes a tragic heroine. According to Roman opinion, their revered military leader is enslaved by a strumpet, a mere gypsy, rather than the acknowledged Queen of Egypt. Despite this, Shakespeare has concocted a portrait of Cleopatra in all her infinite variety—coquettish,

even shrewish at times, but still a noble empress descending from royal kings, contrary to Roman opinion.

Antony, ironically, is seen as torn between his military and emotional desires, at times indecisive and vacillating. He never uses his superior military strength on land and instead chooses to fight at sea for the sake of vanity. There's no way of knowing what will happen if he does what he's doing. He is not supposed to get involved in a fight as a veteran military leader, but his adversary dares him to do so. He gives up his military advantage at the Battle of Actium in order to pursue Cleopatra. Things happen uncertainly. There is no clear strategy to follow; instead, a great leader who is not supposed to tolerate any disrespect would find various ways to live peacefully.

After losing the match, Antony sues Caesar for permission to live as a private man in Athens. When his lawsuit is turned down, he agrees to end the fight "sword against sword" (III. Xiii. 36). When he falls in love with the queen, it appears that he is unsure if his love will take him to such a tragic end. In the Roman world, love is regarded as less honorable than honor, but Shakespeare portrays love as a natural force with natural laws capable of defeating any power that stands in its way. Antony is a hero who has been set free from the burdens of heroism by love, which has freed him from a duty to honor in return for a commitment to life. His liberation's assurance is also his humiliation and death. Things go unplanned and uncertain. Hence, Antony's destruction becomes the outcome.

Cleopatra, on the other hand, is regarded as politically astute and decisive. She withdraws her fleet, leaving the war to be fought between two Roman colonial forces. It is neither anticipated nor planned for a colonized country like Egypt to take such a step. Since Antony follows her out of the battleground, her withdrawal decides the outcome of the battle. It appears that events are happening without warning or schedule. More than this is the end of both main characters; Antony's death is seen as unheroic, a tragic waste whereas Cleopatra's death is seen as a triumph. At least from a Roman viewpoint, the opposite should happen: who says a strumpet becomes a sign of victory while a hero's end becomes a waste? A military leader should accomplish a heroic deed for himself and his country if there is a strategy and assurance, and such a queen should march in Caesar's victorious procession in Rome. Instead of being humiliated or enslaved by the Romans, she kills herself out of her discretion. She's already known that traveling to Rome will result in even more embarrassment for herself and her people.

The following lines, however, convey the reality of Cleopatra's character:

*Then put my tires and mantles on him, whilst
I wore his Sword Phillipian (II. V. 28-29).*

The man who rules half of the planet has been reduced to dressing as a woman. This is not the end of a leader whose decisions and actions are studied and planned. It is the end of one whose actions have passed through some sort of chaos where there is no plan taken to determine the consequences of any act.

Another example of the uncertain consequences of taking decisions is King Lear's decision at the beginning of William Shakespeare's King Lear. Though his decision to divide his kingdom among his daughters seems foolish, yet no one expects that his decree will lead to the result with it the tragedy ends. Furthermore, he seems to have serious doubts about his daughters' fidelity. In this tragedy, on the contrary, the unforeseen occurs: the wicked flourish while the innocents are exiled. Things just happen; there is no concrete plan or design that will result in particular outcomes. Indeed, King Lear has not looked beneath the surface.

He has either enabled ceremonial appearances to supplant internal fact, or he has failed to differentiate between the two. It was neither anticipated nor predicted that he would die.

As he makes his regal way through the court at first, King Lear exudes power and assurance. Out of his excessive trust in his daughters and in his long rule, he reveals his intention to split his kingdom among his daughters. At the outset, his speech and ceremonial ceremony suggest a strength that demonstrates the continuity and assurance of a long, uncontested reign. However, because of his excessive trust in his daughters' love, this is just what Lear expects. The ingenious love daughter who refuses to lie in front of her father is expelled. Lear is not certain of the consequences of his action.

In deciding and performing the act of dividing his kingdom, an act which seems both reasonable and generous for a person in King Lear's position, Lear sets in motion a chain of events which show his vulnerabilities not only as a king and a father but also as a man. Though it is naive to presume to be stripped of power and responsibilities while still retaining authority's trappings, it is unlikely that his reward will be filial ingratitude. However, he is misguided in believing his daughters to be treated with kindness. While their father expects them to run the country safely and peacefully, after usurping power, their true nature emerges. His two wicked daughters, as if they were competing in cruelty to their old father, who had been so kind to them; he'll gradually lose all respect and all his train.

It's a tough transition from becoming a monarch to being a beggar, from ruling millions to getting just one attendant. Lear does not anticipate being reduced to the state of a ragged, homeless madman by his elder daughters. No one expects the king's risky decision to split his kingdom to result in such a tragic outcome. But as two ruthless powers, his elder daughters manipulate his naivety, ignorance, and misunderstanding of the reality of human nature.

Cordelia's death exemplifies the world's unpredictability, which is troubling because she is an innocent victim of the darkness that surrounds her. Anyone reading the play for the first time will anticipate that this character will be rewarded at the conclusion. Shakespeare, on the other hand, refuses to rescue her because the message to save her is too late. The dramatist appears to be portraying the ruthless outcomes of evil and chaos in the world. The play seems to show that Lear's decision to divide his kingdom is a mistake since such a division will lead to chaos. There is no need to prepare or predict the chaos. There is nothing certain about chaos.

Conclusion

On the whole, the three tragedies Doctor Faustus, Antony and Cleopatra, and King Lear teach the uncertainty of this world as Sir Philip Sidney claims in *The Defense of Poesy*. Any action taken by the main characters is fraught with danger. Doctor Faustus's soliloquies show how this doctor lives in doubt and irresolution. He is not concerned with plans or consequences; rather, he is proud of his humanistic intelligence capacity. Like Faustus is Antony, the Roman leader in Antony and Cleopatra. Everything seems to be planned and anticipated until he falls in love with the Egyptian Queen. After that things happen naturally and without fixed direction. His love seems to liberate him from all restrictions and agreements. For him, the most important thing is to live his private life. When he is rejected, he kills himself. Cleopatra, on the other hand, demonstrates that she is a heroine. She is not merely a wanton, but she is a shrewd politician. Finally, King Lear's decision is not dissimilar to Faustus's. Lear's decision sets in motion a chain of events, which manifest his daughters' tyranny and show his vulnerability as a human being.

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