Moral Lessons in Shakespearean Tragedies

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Abstract

William Shakespeare, the most quoted author in English Literature for his pithy lines that can be found scattered throughout his works, excels in artistic perfection and for not being overtly didactic in any of his works. He has successfully saved himself from any kind of propagandist affiliations—religious, social or moral. Still, his works are not altogether lacking in moral lessons. Shakespeare’s moral vision is perceptible in almost all his works which are just representation of human nature that abounds in the glory of practical wisdom and prudence. In the present paper I attempt at exploring four great tragedies by Shakespeare for the moral lessons inextricably woven in the fabric of the plays.

Keywords: moral lessons, didactic element, practical wisdom, human values, moral order
By the common consent of critics and general readers, *King Lear*, *Othello*, *Macbeth* and *Hamlet* are considered to be Shakespeare’s greatest tragedies. The question arises: do they contain any moral lessons?

It is generally argued that Shakespeare was neither a moral teacher nor a preacher; he was an artist, and a supreme artist at that. He did not invent stories to give moral lessons to his audience or readers. He simply borrowed the stories from various sources and gave them dramatic shape. But he did it so artistically and effectively that he is regarded as the greatest poet and playwright in English literature.

There is a saying: beauty lies in the eyes of the beholder. Similarly it can be said that the meaning of a text lies in the perception of the reader, and the meaning differs from reader to reader. So when moral lessons are derived from Shakespeare’s tragedies, it does not mean that Shakespeare intended to impress upon his audience or readers some principles to guide them in their life. He is the least didactic of all writers. His chief aim was to entertain his audience and make his living as an actor and dramatist.

So, some critics have contended that Shakespeare has no philosophy of life. Even the learned literary historian, Arthur Compton Rickett has concurred:

> “Snakes in Iceland. There are no snakes in Iceland.” We may apply this old story to Shakespeare’s philosophy. There is no philosophy. Shakespeare was an artist and concerned primarily not with postulating theories of life, but with the stuff of life itself. (*A History of English Literature* 135)

William J. Long also seems to have a similar opinion when he describes Robert Browning as a moralizer as he cannot be “disinterested, satisfied, as Shakespeare was, with life itself, without drawing any moral conclusions. Browning has always a moral ready, and insists upon giving his own view of life, which Shakespeare never does” (*English Literature* 474).
But the judgement on the greatest poet and playwright in English literature is altogether erroneous. The fact is that Shakespeare does have a philosophy, and, as morality comes within the purview of philosophy, there are moral lessons in his works. To begin with, no discerning reader of Shakespeare can deny that his poem “The Rape of Lucrece” is a moral piece of poetry. As a matter of fact, an author’s creative work can never be devoid of his philosophy. A great literary work is like a kaleidoscope. You rotate it and see different patterns of colours. Viewed from different angles a literary work also presents different aspects of life and morality. Even a humorous piece has some implicit moral, that of making the readers feel happy and forget the worries and miseries of life for the time being.

There is moral common to all tragedies that the tragic hero suffers because of some flaw or foible in his character. Shakespeare’s tragedies are about kings and generals. Lear is a king, Hamlet is a prince, Othello is a general and Macbeth, too, is a general and becomes a king. As we have been nurtured on democratic sentiments, we are not as much moved by their sad fate as by the sufferings of common people like us. Shakespeare’s age was an age of monarchy. Humanity was divided into two classes- the rulers and the ruled. The common people were simply slaves and fodder for wars. Shakespeare has not told us much about the social life and general problems of the people at large. He deals mainly with the uppermost crust of society and we fail to identify ourselves with those worthies. Let them suffer for the misdeeds they have done. What is that to us? We cannot share their sorrows and sufferings as we do of those who are more like us. But as Shakespeare’s subject is human nature, which is the same in all times and climes, we can profit by studying human nature and draw our own conclusions.

King Lear

Goneril and Regan, the eldest daughters of King Lear are ungrateful. They ill-treat their father, who has given them his kingdom, drive him mad and turn him out of their palaces. That daughters can be so cruel is hard to believe. Psychologists say- and it is fact of life- that daughters love their fathers more than sons do. Goneril and Regan are exceptions. A great writer, as Shakespeare, no doubt, is, should be concerned with general truths of life and not exceptions.
Prudence is an important quality of character. Cordelia, the youngest daughter of Lear, lacks it. She does not know that an old man should be kept in good humour but she is blunt in her statement that she loves him as a daughter should love her father, neither more nor less. Lear is at the mercy of her unscrupulous sisters. Even innocent persons like Cordelia with harmless intentions sometimes do great harm.

An important lesson that can be drawn from the play, King Lear is that illicit love, more often than not, leads to tragic end. Goneril and Regan deceive their husbands and love Edmund, the bastard son of the Earl of Gloucester. Both the sisters become rivals in keeping Edmund as their secret lover. Goneril poisons Regan and kills her and in the end when her own (Goneril’s) extra martial liaison is exposed she commits suicide. Illicit love is a sin from the viewpoint of religion and a crime in the eyes of the man-made laws. But the high-ups escape the so-called long arms of the law for some time but they cannot go unpunished when circumstances turn against them.

In the sub-plot of Gloucester in the play, King Lear, the ill-effects of illicit love are more clearly brought out. Gloucester has a son, Edmund by a mistress and he reposes greater faith in him than in his legitimate son, Edgar. Illicit love of Gloucester is at the root of the whole tragedy of his life. Edmund is directly or indirectly responsible for all the deaths in the play, blinding of his father and making his half-brother Edgar’s life miserable. The main characters in the play suffer because of passion which means anger, love and lust. George Meredith said:

In tragic life, God wot
No villains need be, passions spin the plot: (The Oxford Book of English Verse 775)

With the coming of old age, some people become ill-tempered and whimsical. They lose their temper at the slightest provocation and they cannot help it. Still, they should try to control their anger. Lear is a victim of uncontrollable anger. He disowns his daughter Cordelia. Then he curses and abuses Goneril. When anger is in, wit is out. So others should also make allowance for this weakness of an old man. Patience and tolerance should be exercised both by the old people and by those who have to deal with them.
When fathers do not understand their children, they commit blunders. Lear fails to judge the characters of his three daughters. He favours those who are undeserving and deprives the deserving one of her share in the kingdom, and severs relations with her. Gloucester, too, is ignorant of the real nature of his two sons, Edmund and Edgar. He favours his bastard son, Edmund thinking that he is his well-wisher whereas he is his enemy number one. Edmund betrays his father to Regan and her husband and is responsible for his father’s being blinded. It is a curious paradox that Gloucester cannot see the nature of his sons when he has eyes and after being blinded he sees who is good and who is bad.

Evil, though powerful and attractive in the beginning, ultimately proves to be self-destructive. Virtue pays in the long run. This is amply testified by Edgar when after killing Edmund he endorses the principle of dispensation of divine justice

The gods are just and of our pleasant vices
Make instruments to plague us
The dark and vicious place where thee he got
Cost him his eyes. \textit{(Complete Works of Shakespeare 1111)}

In the above speech of Edgar, there is a moral lesson. This is confirmed by the great Shakespearean critic, Dr A. C. Bradley in his famous critique, Shakespearean Tragedy:

One wishes he (Edgar) had not said so to his dying brother about his dead father. ‘The gods are just’ would have been enough. It may be suggested that Shakespeare merely wishes to introduce this moral somehow… \textit{(254)}

Othello

Othello kills his wife Desdemona on the suspicion of her being unfaithful to him. Desdemona loved him for his bravery and was not aware of his rash and impetuous temperament. But love is blind and cannot see the faults and foibles of the person loved. Their marriage is incompatible from the very beginning. Their backgrounds are quite different. He is a moor; she is the daughter of a Venetian senator. He is dark complexioned; she is fair complexioned. They are mismatched.
They elope and marry. The question of choosing one’s life-mate is a very serious and complex matter. It should be decided with a cool head and not on the basis of hot passion.

A man in high position should be extra careful of those around him. Othello is a credulous fool. He believes in all that Iago, the villain, tells him and he falls into the latter’s trap so much so that he strangulates his wife. Of course, he kisses her before he kills her, but his love for her is not unwavering and deep. He acts in haste and repents afterwards. He does not give his wife sufficient chance and time to prove herself true to him.

Desdemona surrenders to him without any strong protest. She does not assert herself. It was not the age of awareness of woman’s rights. Man was for God and she for God in man, as Milton said about the relationship of husband and wife. So she is meek and submissive and pays with her life for being so. Married life should be based on mutual respect and confidence. Othello lacks both. To keep harmonious relations, one must wait and watch, discuss matters dispassionately with one’s life-partner and not take action in anger and on suspicion.

In the *Merchant of Venice* Portia, in the guise of a male lawyer, says that mercy is a double blessing.

*It is twice blest*

*It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.* (*Complete Works of Shakespeare* 246)

In the same way, doubt is a double curse; it harms one against whom it is directed and also one who entertains it. When Othello realizes that his wife is loving and innocent, it is too late. He has already killed her. So he kills himself too. Tragedy takes place when the venom of suspicion is allowed to spread unabated. In the words of A. C. Bradley:

*His (Othello’s) tragedy lies in this—that his whole nature was indisposed to jealousy, and yet was such that he was unusually open to deception, and if once wrought to passion, likely to act with little reflection, with no delay, and in the most decisive manner conceivable.* (*Shakespearean Tragedy* 151)
Jealousy is the cause of tragedy which claims the lives of both Desdemona and Othello. The moral lesson is clear. One must give no room to jealousy in one’s heart. Unfounded suspicion leads to dangerous consequences. Appearances are deceptive. Othello cannot see the difference between appearance and reality. What Iago shows him and what he sees himself is only an appearance, Cassio is made to appear Desdemona’s lover whereas he is only a petitioner. Othello believes that Desdemona gave the handkerchief to Cassio as Iago makes it appear so. It appears to Othello that his wife is deceiving him, which is far from the truth. Things are not what they seem. Iago is not what he seems to be. He wears the mask of honesty but in reality he has a heart that is the very workshop of the Devil. But Othello is taken in by his show of sincerity.

Macbeth

Macbeth is a tragedy born out of ambition. No doubt, ambition is a great inner force to spur one to rise high in life but only when it is directed in the right way. Macbeth has an ambition to become King but he becomes king by killing the ruling king, who is his kinsman, loving and generous to him and, moreover, he is a guest to his house. Macbeth thinks of all these factors and hesitates to implement the scheme of killing the king. He even realizes that his duty is to serve and protect his guest instead of taking his life. But his wife, Lady Macbeth overpowers him, incites him and even helps him in committing the crime.

Lady Macbeth is a real monster. She is cruel and cunning. She hardly possesses any womanly qualities. In her mad desire to become the queen of the country she puts aside all considerations of morality and concentrates only on attaining her object. Not only is her end (that is, aim) unjust but she also employs most unjust means to achieve it. Unjust means corrupt even just ends. But for Lady Macbeth means justify the end. The saying very precisely applies to her: “As you sow, so shall you reap.” She has to suffer for her evil deed, goes mad and kills herself. Those who do evil deeds suffer mentally and spiritually, however hard they may try to conceal their real condition. So ‘look before you leap’ is a good advice for all and sundry who undertake some task. We know the case of the American pilot of the plane that dropped atom bombs on the two cities of Japan, Hiroshima and Nagasaki during the World War Second. He went crazy and
suffered acutely. There is an explicit moral lesson in Macbeth’s desperate cry on Lady Macbeth’s unnatural death.

Life is but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more. It (life) is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing. (Complete Works of Shakespeare 1025-26)

Macbeth believes in the prophecies of witches. He meets them and they further whet his ambition which he has secretly harboured in his heart. Now, contact with evil beings, natural or supernatural, never brings good results. It spells disaster and death. We often read in newspapers that a tantric killed an innocent person and a follower of tantric killed even his own child, God knows for what aim or gain? But the foul deed is most horrible for a normal human being.

A wife can make or mar the life of her husband. Lady Macbeth leads her husband to the path of his undoing because she dominates him completely. Othello’s wife is weak enough to exercise any effect on her husband’s way of thinking. A woman should neither be too weak nor too commanding in her relation with her man. She should meet him on equal footing. She should neither bow before him unnecessarily nor make him henpecked. Mutual understanding and give-and-take of views go a long way in making married life a successful affair, free from stress and strain, suppression and repression, trials and troubles and cruelties and calamities.

Hamlet

Hamlet is the story of an over-thinking philosopher, that is, Prince Hamlet. The story begins with the event of fratricide. Fratricide is a heinous crime but ascending the throne has often been accompanied with fratricide. Achieving of power has been through vicious means. Didn’t Ashoka, called the Great, murder his own brothers in a large number to occupy the throne? Didn’t Mohammed Tughlak lay a trap to kill his brother and father to succeed in usurping power? Didn’t Auranjeb kill his three brothers and imprison his father in order to become the ruler of the country? Now this power game is often inhuman and dangerous. And it goes on.
Even in our own times the powerful politicians get their rivals killed. Only a few of such cases are detected and culprits brought to the book.

Claudius kills his elder brother, King Hamlet and marries his sister-in-law, King Hamlet’s wife. The criminal in order to hide his crime goes on plotting to commit more crimes. He is never at peace. When Claudius realizes that Prince Hamlet has the knowledge of his murder, his only concern is to get Hamlet also killed in order to save his own skin. Hamlet’s inference, after the revelation of his father’s ghost that Claudius, his brother, is his murderer, “That one may smile and smile, and be a villain” (Complete Works of Shakespeare 1037) contains a stern warning against appearances.

Hamlet’s mother has married Claudius in complete ignorance of the fact this man is the murderer of her late husband. Prince Hamlet’s state of mind is on the verge of insanity. The effect of the remarriage of a parent on the mind of his/her child is devastating and the child needs to be treated with extra care and attention and not to be neglected at all. It is difficult for a variety of reasons for the child to accept the second marriage of his parent.

Hamlet is given to too much thinking. That tells upon his mind. He wants to take revenge on his uncle and in search of a suitable opportunity to do so he goes on postponing the action. Hamlet is a young man. Youth is a period of experiencing joy and making love. But he finds no joy in life and becomes indifferent to his beloved Ophelia. She is so much in love with him that she actually goes mad and commits suicide by drowning herself in a river. Love is a mad passion. It should be kept under the control of reason. When passion gets the upper hand, the consequence is calamitous.

Brooding nature is not a healthy sign of one’s character. Hamlet should strike a proper balance between thought and action. But in his case it is thought that dominates. If thought is not given the practical shape of action, it is an exercise in futility. But in Shakespeare’s days it was a fashion to appear melancholy in order to be considered wise. Postponement of action is a lazy habit. Hamlet goes on postponing the action of taking revenge on his uncle, waiting for an ideal occasion, and ideal occasions are hard to come by. Hamlet, in spite of being a very wise and
learned man, has forgotten the wise saying: ‘Never put off till tomorrow what you can do today.’ If he had acted in time a large number of deaths, including his own, that take place in the end, could have been avoided Inaction becomes the cause of the tragedy, the wholesale killing of the good people and bad people alike. No doubt, Hamlet is a noble soul. But nobility in this mad, bad and sad world is rarely recognized and rewarded. So prudence and practical wisdom, too, should be utilized to achieve good ends, otherwise the good ends will remain only a mirage.

In conclusion, it may well be said that William Shakespeare, the unrivalled authority on human nature in English as well as in world literature, has integrated in his plays a deep human wisdom. His wisdom does not induce men and women of his plays to play fair or foul and achieve the desired ends and yet be rewarded in the end. Though it was to some extent, the era of poetic justice, and evil was overcome by goodness in art and literature and other art forms, Shakespeare does not impose his moral ideas on the readers as did other writers of his times. In his most natural and yet most artistic manner, he advocates such prudence and practical wisdom as is value based. In his treatment of these four tragedies also Shakespeare’s supreme concern is establishment of a moral order.
Works Cited


