



## NATURE OF SHAKESPEARE'S CONTRIBUTION TO VERSE DRAMA

Dr. Bimlesh K. Singh, Associate Professor,  
Dept. of English, C.R.A. College, Sonipat (HR)  
Email: drbimleshksingh@gmail.com

**Abstract :** Shakespeare belonged to the age which was rich in poetic possibilities, exuberance, high flight of imagination and, above all, dramatics. The impassioned lyrical vitality and impetuous outbursts of diction reached empyrean heights thereby taking Elizabethan drama refreshingly poetical. It would seem that Shakespeare began as a lyric poet, and ended his creative career as a dramatic poet. A product of the Renaissance, Shakespeare had his vision finely rolling across the subtle and superb aspects of the world.

**Keywords:** Verse drama, Blank verse, Imagination, Paradoxical, Tragedy

**Introduction :** A patient perusal of Shakespeare's verse drama impresses a reader immediately by its variety as it had given vent to the full gamut of human feelings. It seems that Shakespeare's wonderful poetic gifts enabled him to reveal the variety and complexity of nature and human life. T.S. Eliot rightly observes about Shakespeare's verse drama, "...nothing is superfluous and there is no line of poetry which is not justified by its dramatic value. Shakespeare's predecessors, popularly called 'University Wits', had already made innovative efforts in the realm of drama. Marlowe made sustained use of 'Blank verse' in his famous plays, *Dr. Faustus*, *Edward II*, *Tamburlaine*, *The Jew of Malta*. Really, he infused new life and vitality into blank verse thereby communication. Marlowe's masterly employment of 'Mighty Line' had exquisitely influenced the inborn poetic imagination of Shakespeare which resulted in the creation of a series of verse dramas – Tragedies, Comedies, History plays, Romances. But then, the poetic device of blank verse reaches its perfection, its excellence in the verse dramas of Shakespeare. John Lyly provided Shakespeare with a model of ornate prose, highly flowered expression with balanced, antithetical sentences, wrought out with conscious artistry lavish in alliteration and assonance, puns and conceits. Though Shakespeare followed under the Lylyan influence, yet he was able to improve upon cloying impact with a variation due to his rare imaginative power.

The present paper is a humble attempt to show Shakespeare's novel and original contribution to the verse drama which was well developed by modern poetic dramatists in twentieth century.

Emile Legouis' contention that Shakespeare had nothing behind him except his natural genius and his daily experience of the stage is a significant reflection on the dramatist's unique mind and art which lent a special charm and attraction to his works (Legouis, 205). Whereas his constant exposure to the stage deepened his histrionic wisdom, his wonderful imagination enabled him to see into the life of his characters, their complex mental and spiritual reactions' to the universe around them. It is here that Shakespeare's indispensable reliance on verse as a medium of exploration and revelation of the inner world of characters comes to the fore. The rendering of the psyche of the characters would have been otherwise impossible. The poetic genius of Shakespeare ransacks the whole world of poetic devices – images, symbols, allusion, paradox, irony etc. to lay bare the chequered life of characters. Words/Images in Shakespeare's hand become an objective tension-ridden reality and they represent the inner turmoil, trial and tribulation of the protagonist. . The images are full of intensity and create a unique emotional impact on the reader and at the same time reflecting Shakespeare's vision of life. Appreciating Shakespeare's remarkable handling of images Dryden writes:

All the images of Nature were still present  
to him and he drew them not laboriously but  
luckily. When he describes anything, you  
more than see it, you feel it too. (Dryden, 43)

It would seem that Shakespeare's imageries helped him to manifest the heart and soul of characters. Whether comedies or tragedies—all are beautifully conceived in symbolic representation of life.

In *Hamlet* Shakespeare achieves a tremendous impact and semblance of reality through the images that he employs to reveal the innermost conflict arising throughout the play in Hamlet's psyche. It is through images that Shakespeare captures the inner state of mind of a character where thoughts, feelings and words cohere into a self-sustaining aesthetic reality. Hamlet who is faced with unanswered and unanswerable





riddles of life i.e. problem of death does demand from the dramatist a wholly new language to give vent to his philosophical reflections. This new language comprises apt and vivid images, images marking the atmosphere and theme of the play. When he begins to speak, the images stream to him almost immediately and spontaneously. Hamlet's imagery shows us that whenever he thinks and reacts, he does so like a visionary, a seer for whom living things of the world around him embody and symbolize thought. In short, Hamlet's imagery is one of the central stylistic device of the play by which Shakespeare probes the complex psyche of the hero who is confronted with "a sea of troubles", or "moral idealism" as A.C. Bradley would say. (Bradley, 25)

Hamlet's images bring out a unique closeness to reality. His first soliloquy expresses the short space of time between his father's death and his mother's remarriage in terms of a series of pictures taken from real life:

.... O God! God!  
How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable  
Seem to me all the uses of this world!  
Fie on't, ah fie, 'tis an unweeded garden  
That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature  
Possesses it merely.....  
Or a little later Hamlet addresses Horatio,  
"The funeral baked meats  
Did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables. (I, II)

Herein, we come across a concrete rendering of a human soul in anguish. Curiously enough, Shakespeare's use of imagery in Hamlet is mostly concrete, simple and easy to understand. In sharp contrast to Othello and Lear who awaken heaven and elements in their imagery, Hamlet's imagery hit the mark with unerring sureness. It is notable that with the help of vivid and concrete imagery, Hamlet reveals the truth, unmask men, makes others recognize the truth. For example, by means of images Hamlet leads his mother to the recognition of truth. He renews the memory of his father in her by means of that forceful description of his outward appearance, which could compare with Hyperion, Mars and Mercury. On the other hand, another series of comparisons seek to bring home to his mother the real nature of Claudius:

A mildew'd ear,  
Blasting his wholesome brother.....  
.....  
That from a shelf the precious diadem stole,  
And put in his pocket;  
A king of shreds and patches. (III, IV)

That the state of Hamlet is suffering from moral crisis is well-delineated with the image of disease, image of sickness, image of ulcer as Caroline Spurgeon says, "There is something rotten in the state of Denmark." Furthermore, this poisoning reappears as a leitmotiv in the last act. Thus, imagery and action continually play into each other's hands and we see how the term dramatic imagery gains a new meaning.

The problem of appearance and reality is central to Hamlet and written deep into its idiom. Thus, these are images of apparel or clothes. In the world of surfaces to which Shakespeare exposes us in *Hamlet*, clothes are naturally a factor of importance. "The apparel oft proclaims the man", Polonius assures Laertes, cataloguing maxims in the young man's ear as he is about to leave for Paris. In *Macbeth* Shakespeare makes telling use of the cloth/apparel image to suggest the widening gulf between illusion and reality which relates to Macbeth's immoral, unjust, "vaulting ambition" for accession to throne. Agnus, the nobleman of Scotland, vividly portrays Macbeth's ill-motivated advances:

Now does he feel his title Hang loose about him,  
like a giant's robe  
Upon a dwarfish thief. (V, II)

The image makes aptly clear that Macbeth, the hypocrite, pretends to be what he is not in reality. Examining the implication of the image Cleanth Brooks rightly remarks that Macbeth's robe is not his own; it belongs to another.

Shakespeare's recourse to verse enabled him to intensify and establish the efficacy of the events in the very dramatic contexts. It is remarkable to note that Shakespeare appears to be a modern, a contemporary genius drawing upon the wealth of the modern techniques like paradox, irony, alliteration, metaphor etc. to express



the pressure of the contexts. That is why, Shakespearean expressions may seem paradoxical but examined in the dramatic contexts they become authentic and sincere. In the opening scene of *Macbeth* the witches speak out jointly:

Fair is foul, and foul is fair:  
Hover through the fog and filthy air. (I, I)

In a sense, these words constitute the key-note, the prelude of the play. They highlight the reversal of values and the states of affairs which have turned topsy-turvy. Macbeth, the protagonist goes against what is good and honourable and takes to the path of crime, murder and violence. It is in the context of this distortion of values that the here-turned-villain acts. The witches – the evil forces of nature are instruments of darkness and represent the growing moral blindness of the hero. Thus, Shakespeare's vivid execution of the paradox and pregnant expression proves the affinity, the inter-link of the witches and the hero-turned-villain. And the vaultingly ambitious here to no better than a wild, a selfish character who does take to fair or foul means to realize his desire of becoming a King. Such an evil march naturally reduces his life to "a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury signifying nothing". Hence, Shakespeare's judicious use of paradox suggests the origin, the womb of inevitable disaster which must overtake an ignoble here like Macbeth who has given his soul away to vicious and sinister motive.

Thus, Shakespeare's introduction of the super natural helps him dramatize the totality of the reality comprising the contemporary beliefs, doubts, great chain of being etc. in *Hamlet* when Horatio, the skeptic doubts the existence of the ghosts, Hamlet convinces him of it through his deeper belief in the mystery of the universe. Hamlet tells Horatio:

There are more things in heaven and earth;  
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy. (I, V)

So, through evocative and thought-provoking verse, Shakespeare represents the milieu, minds of characters, the mysterious link between nature and human nature. Shakespeare seemed to have believed in the essential harmony of human life/society and the breach of the natural unity must lead to chaos. In *Julius Caesar* Shakespeare presents the impending threat of war or pestilence by means of 'comets' due to Julius Caesar's assassination. Shakespeare vividly says:

When beggars die, there are no comets seen:  
The heavens themselves blaze forth the death  
of prince. (II, II)

Plutarch also relates that 'a comet appeared after Caesar's death for seven nights' in succession, and then was seen no more, that the Sun was darkened and the earth brought forth new and unripe fruit. In *Paradise Lost* Milton regards the appearance of a comet which "with fear of change perplexes nations". This points out in Shakespeare a typical Renaissance soul with profound scientific temper seeking to express and unravel the on-goings of nature vis-à-vis human nature. Like an astrologer, Shakespeare seemed to believe that spots/heavenly bodies foretell disaster:

As stars with trains of fire and dews of blood,  
Disasters in the Sun, and the Moist star,  
Upon whose influence Neptune's empire stands,  
We sick almost to doomsday with eclipse;  
As harbingers preceding still the fates,  
And prologue to the omen coming on,  
Heaven and earth together demonstrated  
Unto our climatures and countrymen. (I, I)

In the expression, "Sick almost to doomsday with eclipse", Shakespeare seems to allude to the Biblical prophecy that at the second coming of Christ "the moon shall not give her light and the stars shall fall from heaven and the powers of the heavens shall be shaken."

The unique excellences of Shakespeare's verse are precision, conciseness and compactness which make it immediately suggestive. Sometimes with the help of these devices Shakespeare succeeds in showing the curious impression of the potential plot of the entire play in the very opening itself. In the opening lines of *Hamlet* we come across such a beautiful evocation: "Stand and unfold yourself". (II, II)

The sense of unfolding resonates through the play, from the ghost's word "I could a tale unfold," while speaking to Hamlet. As regards Hamlet's play-within-the play, "The Mousetrap" the term will signify



Hamlet's attempt to expose the king's guilt: "The play's the thing where I'll catch the conscience of the King". (III, II)

Thus, the opening lines of the play prove revelatory and expose the truth. After the exit of the Queen, Claudius' sudden nervousness and departure confirm his guilt and now sometimes doubtful Hamlet starts believing in the words of the Ghost. He says to Horatio:

O Good Horatio, I'll take the  
ghost's world for a thousand pound. (V, II)

Hence, Shakespeare's opening of the play is well-contrived and consciously managed to unravel the truth through removal of doubt and suspense thereby leading to climatic action.

Moreover, Shakespeare's remarkable contribution to the enrichment of English tragedy lies in his introduction of the complex aspects of human psychology – motives and intention which lead to the irresolvable confrontation of character with invisible forces. It seems that the protagonists' inability to foresee the whole truth of the action/event makes them take a wrong decision which brings disaster/change of fortune. King Lear, Macbeth, Othello have to pay the price for "What is false within" them. Their patient suffering due to errors of judgement that they had committed does move us. Their ironic predicament mystifies our sense of the universe and the audience feels helpless before the desperate trials of the characters to face the evil, the designs of nemesis. The designs of darkness enveloping the whole atmosphere of the play influences the king and the clown, the experienced and the innocent alike. More often than not, in the whirlwind of retributive and counter-forces, even the innocent or seemingly just characters have to suffer equally along with the deserving ones. Shakespeare's imaginative insight into reality of life makes him feel that life and death are eternal phenomena. The wisdom of life, Shakespeare observes, lies in calm acceptance of this truth:

Men must endure  
Their going hence, even as their coming hither:  
Ripeness is all. (V, II)

Shakespeare's tragic heroes appeal to us not because of their unique power of endurance or endurance or fortitude but because of their superb intellectual power which makes them look askance at the evil around them. Hamlet's (intellectual) curiosity to set his "lands in order" brings to mind Oedipus's intellectual curiosity to know the cause of curse of his kingdom and consequently set it right. Much more element of the mind or psyche seems answerable to the downfall of the character than merely chance or coincidence. The hasty decisions of Othello, Macbeth, Lear owe more to their powerful passions than invisible or uncontrollable forces. The errors committed by them in the heat of passion weaves the complex web of tragedy from which they cannot escape. The irresistible drive of the character leads him to violate even the social duties that devolve upon them. Macbeth's excessive ambition makes him blind to his moral duties of saving his king and the passionate hero murders the king instantly and thus sows the seed of his endless suffering. George Meredith rightly says:

In tragic life, God wot,  
No villain need be! Passions spin the plot:  
We are betrayed by what is false within. (Meredith, 43)

Torn asunder between what they do and what they should have done, Shakespeare's tragic heroes suffer a conflict, an excruciating agony which affects audience/readers tremendously. Moreover, Shakespeare's incorporation of the ironic elements into tragedies make the play powerful and mysterious. Shakespeare's innovative sense of making the incredible look credible make his tragedies varied and even complex. In *Julius Caesar*, the assassination of Caesar, the great realist by Brutus, the great idealist is an example of glaring irony. The irony becomes complete when Caesarism, instead of being destroyed by the death of Caesar, is re-established by Octavius Caesar who becomes the first emperor of Rome. In his funeral speech, Antony says, "Brutus is an honourable man". Such a use of irony proves conspicuous when even the mob can get it and at the end they cry out: " They were traitors; honourable men!" (V, III)

And as a consequence, Caesar proves triumphant to the total detriment of the assassins. The triumph of the spirit of Caesar even when he is physically dead is an ironic dramatization of the conspiracy. Even Brutus realizes:

O Julius Caesar, though art might yet!  
Thy spirit walks abroad, and turns our swords  
In our own proper entrails. (V, III)



Thus, Shakespearean tragedies are marked by the dramatist's profound vision of the conflict between the internal and the external forces. Thanks to Shakespeare's empyrean imagination, he aptly shows in his tragedies how a single error or shortcoming of a character may subject him to the crushing altar of the unseen forces or circumstances beyond his comprehension and control. Shakespearean beyond his comprehension and control. Shakespearean tragedies are distinct from the Greek tragedies of Aeschylus and Sophocles because herein all is not preordained by "the President of Immortals". The motive-force of tragedy drives primarily from character.

#### Works Cited

- Bradley, A.C., Shakespearean Tragedy. London: Macmillan, 1985.  
Dryden, John. Essay of Dramatic Poesy. Ed. W.P. Ker. London: OUP, 1951  
Legouis, Emile & Cazamian, Louis. History of English Literature. Delhi: Macmillan, 1998.  
Shakespeare, William. The Complete Works of Shakespeare. Calcutta: OUP, 1980.  
Meredith, George. Modern Love. London: Kessinger, 2005.