

CHAPTER FIVE

Types of Drama

In a strict sense, plays are classified as being either tragedies or comedies. The broad difference between the two is in the ending. Comedies end happily. Tragedies end on an unhappy note. The tragedy acts as a purge. It arouses our pity for the stricken one and our terror that we ourselves may be struck down. As the play closes we are washed clean of these emotions and we feel better for the experience. A classical tragedy tells of a high and noble person who falls because of a "tragic flaw," a weakness in his own character. A domestic tragedy concerns the lives of ordinary people brought low by circumstances beyond their control. Domestic tragedy may be realistic seemingly true to life or naturalistic realistic and on the seamy side of life. A romantic comedy is a love story. The main characters are lovers; the secondary characters are comic. In the end the lovers are always united. Farce is comedy at its broadest. Much fun and horseplay enliven the action. The comedy of manners, or artificial comedy, is subtle, witty, and often mocking. Sentimental comedy mixes sentimental emotion with its humor. Melodrama has a plot filled with pathos and menacing threats by a villain, but it does include comic relief and has a happy ending. It depends upon physical action rather than upon character probing. Tragic or comic, the action of the play comes from conflict of characters how the stage people react to each other. These reactions make the play.

There are various types of drama. But in here we only deal with the three basic types. These are tragedy, comedy and tragi-comedy.

Tragedy

Tragedy is a dramatic work in which the ending turns out to be disastrous/ harmful for the main characters. Aristotle, a Greek philosopher of 300 B.C, defines tragedy as: "an imitation of an action that is serious, complete in itself, and of a certain magnitude" (in Poetics). The word 'serious' in Aristotle's definition indicates the basic feature of tragedy, i.e. it shows the serious intention. This is to say that the disastrous outcome provokes seriousness and, as Aristotle puts it, "arouse pity and fear" in the audience. The major character or the protagonist who suffers the outcome is said to be tragic hero. Even though at times there could be comic events, it causes serious moods and ends unhappily.

The causes of tragic events can be varied. In Ancient Greek, fate, destiny, providence or other related things caused by the supernatural power can be the sources. E.g. Oedipus the King. In the works of Shakespeare, on the other hand, the cause for tragic effect is from human nature and follies. This includes lust, ambition, jealousy or greed. For example, jealousy/ enviousness leads Othello to murder his innocent wife, Desdemona. But he only comes to learn the truth after it was too late. Here are some key features.

- At the beginning of the play something occurs that disrupts the normal order of things.
- Chaos or disorder results in society.

- Extreme emotions are involved.
- Social restraint Disintegrate.
- A climax is reached, usually with the death of the main character (and several others), before order is restored. This purging of emotions that affects the audience at the end of a tragedy is sometimes referred to as **catharsis**.

Comedy

Comedy is precisely a play having happy ending. In comic plays, the outcomes usually turn out to be happy for the major characters. As Aristotle identifies, comedy presents "some defect or ugliness that is not painful or destructive." Characters can feel humiliated or embarrassed but they do not suffer from terrible consequences. This elicits laughter and amuses and entertains the audience. It is meant to bring about comic effects. This kind of comic play, which aims to entertain the audience through absurd and ridiculous characters and actions, is called **farce**.

The actions that lead to the happy ending may not always be funny and light in tune. Equally it could deal with serious, even dangerous, life-threatening situations. In this sense a comedy can deal with issues that are just as serious as tragedy, but the issues are resolved peacefully leading to happy ending.

Tragi-comedy

This, as the name indicates, is a dramatic type, which combines the nature of the two types dealt with above. It has both the serious and the comic moods. We have said earlier that there could be moments of comic relief in tragedy and moments of serious mood in comedy. But tragicomedy is a bit more than that. Characters come nearer to death, but they are saved at the end. For example, the characters come clearly to the serious edge so much although the play ends happily for all in *The Merchant of Venice* by William Shakespeare. The basic pattern, then, is very similar to that of the tragedies.

- . An event occurs
- . This leads to disorder and disrupt
- . Confusion results
- . The problems are resolved.

The difference comes in the way that the action is resolved and the focus that is maintained. In a comedy serious issues may be raised and addressed but the focus is very much on the foolishness of human behaviour.