CONTENT AND PERSPECTIVES IN HUMAN EXPERIENCE AND LITERATURE

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***ABSTRACT*:**Human experiences provide content and perspectives to works of literature. Tragedy and comedy are commonly known as two major categories of human experiences and they have been carried over into works of literature under these terms, particularly as provided by Aristotle, and with tragicomedy given a secondary position. However, as provided by means of a critical approach, this essay shows that this tradition misses one other major category of human experiences which should have also been carried over into literature and this gap has been inadvertently sustained over the centuries. This other category is what this foundational work both establishes and explores as 'inversion', which refers to the cumulative result of a series of human actions and circumstantial events occurring in real life or in literary plots which leave the public or audience firmly convinced a particular individual or a main character has ended on a tragic note or as a loser whereas deep within his or her heart and for some strong reasons, and probably known only to a few, he or she is equally convinced he or she ended on a note of comedy or as a winner. Alternatively, 'inversion' could be that while the public or audience is convinced everything ended on a note of comedy or victory, the individual or main character is convinced it all ended on a note of tragedy or defeat. Inversion is also distinguishable from tragicomedy. Thus, exploration of inversion in literary works henceforth will be important for the future of literature.

Keywords: Aristotle, comedy, human experiences, literary theory, inversion, tragedy.

Introduction

The connection between social criticism, literature and life in society cannot be denied even under critical pressure from literary theories like Formalism, structuralism, post-structuralism and New Criticism that largely consider literature a world of its own. Branches of philosophy that explore human existence and social dynamics from different angles agree with the view that human experiences are a rich source of perspectives for philosophy and literature and this is underscored by theoretical frameworks that make use of both philosophy and the structures of literary theory such as Marxism, feminism, postcolonialism, New Historicism and Queer theory.

People were experiencing tragedy and comedy in their lives long before ancient Greek thinkers like Homer, Epicharmus, and Aristotle as well as important playwrights of Classical Greece namely, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, and Aristophanes turned these two categories of human experiences into conceptual frameworks for literary art. Their creative writings are evidence of dialectical interpenetration between philosophy and literature in the art of social criticism. In this regard, their ingenuity lies not in actually inventing something new but in creatively borrowing from lived experiences into literary art.

This understanding holds even as Aristotle points out in Part III of his Poetics (c. 335 BCE) that Dorians claim to have invented tragedy and comedy whereas Megarians lay claim to comedy. Such claims in ancient Greece do not refer to inventing something new in human experience but for bringing tragedy and comedy to the fore of literary discourse. In addition, ancient Egypt is credited with earliest theatres dating back to around 2800 BCE particularly in connection with mythologies and ceremonies associated with the triad of Osiris, Isis and Horus. On the contrary, ancient Greek theatres

date back to around 700 BCE particularly in connection with the cult of Dionysus which featured dramatic performances of tragedies, with comedies included from 487 BCE while Greek plays of the classical era emerged between the fifth and fourth centuries BCE. In ancient Greece, two muses were accepted for drama, namely, Melpomene (the weeping face) for tragedy and Thalia (the laughing face) for comedy while tragicomedy is still considered inferior by many critics.

Poetics, the earliest extant work of dramatic theory, which calls poems 'representing action' (mimesis or imitation) 'drama', also provides grounds for the broad description of literature as representation of human action. John Dryden goes on to expand this view to become the representation of human nature and actions when he says 'a play ought to be a just and lively image of human nature, reproducing the passions and humours, and the changes of fortune to which it is subject, for the delight and instruction of mankind' (cited in Nwabueze, 2011:17).Aristotle provides in Poetics a classification and analysis of types and characteristics of poetry with respect to medium, object and manner (mode) of representation and lists major categories as epic poetry, tragedy, comedy, dithyrambic poetry and music (from flute and lyre). While his areas of interest according to ranking are tragedy, epic poetry and comedy, he describes tragedy (which he explores at great length) and comedy as two major categories of drama. On the contrary, earliest recorded use of the word 'tragicomedy' can be found in Plautus' prologue to his play, Amphitryon, where Mercury wittingly suggests that the play should be called tragicomoedia because of the indecorum of including slaves alongside a cast of kings and gods.

Inversion:

Inversion is that category of human experiences where the result of a series of human actions and circumstantial events is a situation where the public or an audience is firmly convinced a certain individual in society or a character in a plot is a loser, a tragic hero or tragic heroine whereas for some strong personal reasons known probably to just a few close associates, this individual or character is equally convinced he or she is rather a winner or a comedic hero or heroine. These inverted circumstances also hold true in a situation where the public or an audience is firmly convinced everything has finally ended on a winning note or as comedy whereas it deeply feels like defeat or tragedy to the person of interest.For these inverted circumstances to be achieved, the sequence of actions and events directly producing a sense of tragedy must unfold along a route or at a level different from that directly producing a sense of comedy even as both must occasionally interact and be flush with each other as a unit by means of the individual or character in question. It then devolves on a writer of inversion to keep these two diametric levels synchronised as a unit rather than split.

Determinants of Inversion

Although inversion shares a lot in common with tragedy and comedy, its own determinants are decisive enough to establish it on its own terms. These include: a character admired for stubbornness or perseverance in the face of odds; on behalf of the public, this character overcomes a momentous situation and becomes their hero or heroine; while people applaud that feat, the hero or heroine is privately torn asunder because the effort to achieve that feat also led to the loss of something very dear to him or her; however, only few associates, if at all, know about this loss; thus, while the public celebrates their hero or heroine, he or she participates in the celebration mainly to protect the public's sense of happiness although not doing so pretentiously while deep within is a heart overwhelmed by regrets, hence, at once happy and sad (this is not 'neither happy nor sad', 'either sad or happy' or 'half sad and happy'), at once self-fulfilled and frustrated, at once comedy and tragedy (this is not tragicomedy).

Inversion in Lived Experiences

Every adult knows tragedy happens in the real world as does comedy and tragicomedy. Since everyone somewhat shares in this drama of life in respect of tragedies, comedies and tragicomedies, then, everyone is guilty, in a

manner of speaking. This falls in line with a remark by Otten that 'in the human drama, Morrison reminds us, innocence is neither possible nor desirable' (cited in Palladino, 2008:61). Nevertheless, the exactitude with which a sequence of human actions and events unfold as tragedy, comedy or tragicomedy in works of literature usually is not the same way it unfolds in real life. Same holds true for inversion.

In other words, although inverse heroes and heroines occur in real life, the sequence of human actions and circumstantial events that unfold around them in the real world may not exactly feature all the determinants listed for inverse plots but will surely fit within an inverse framework. In this wise, inversion includes the circumstances of someone who has been so wrongly judged over an unfortunate incident that it, thereafter, significantly distorted or destroyed the person's future despite his or her innocence or spirited attempts at a second chance. Same applies to a situation where someone was misjudged and that misjudgement provides the person with a better state of life. In either case, things are not as they seem, as often said.

Inversion and "the Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"

T. S. Eliot's poem, 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,' which is a reflection on certain social conditions, was published in Poetry magazine in 1915 and exhibits the style of stream of consciousness characteristic of modernism. However, it does not sufficiently exhibit features of inversion but comes close to offering a description of circumstances similar to an inverse hero's or heroine's battle with diametric emotions. To some critics however, the famous opening lines of this poem – 'When the evening is spread out against the sky / Like a patient etherized upon a table' (lines 2-3) – are very disturbing especially when judged against the background of its period in literary history when Georgian poetry was praised for close affinities with nineteenth century Romantic poetry.

In addition, as Hart (1965:254) points out, Eliot's first volume of verse, Prufrock and Other Observations, which was published in 1917, generally 'had a tone of flippant despair' and while 'the Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' and a few others exhibit the rhythms and techniques of ironic contrast familiar to some French Symbolistes, Eliot's poetic expression of conflicted existential conditions comes to a climax in 'the Waste Land'.

Inversion and Prometheus

Aeschylus' Prometheus Bound is another work that comes close to inversion. The plot of this drama will need some re-writing in some important respects to make it an inverse drama.Firstly, Prometheus Bound talks about a time when Prometheus intervenes in the affairs of humankind and by giving humankind the gift of fire rescues them from the tragic consequences of ignorance and annihilation by Zeus who has plans to replace humankind with a new race of creatures. An inverse plot will include a time when Prometheus is a relatively inconspicuous figure before realizing and stepping up to the threats and challenges facing humankind.

Secondly, a different but related personal experience is what will unfold as the turning point experience that will motivate Prometheus to step up to those threats and challenges on behalf of humankind. In other words, Prometheus will neither be getting into this vicarious deed without a preceding turning point experience in his life nor doing so merely to spite Zeus by standing in his way.

Inversion and Major Highlights of Tragedy

A critical look at tragedy and comedy will bring to the fore areas of convergence and divergence with inversion, which will facilitate a better understanding of inversion as a new contribution to literature and literary criticism.Since Aristotle's Poetics, tragedy has always attracted a great deal of critical attention probably much more than comedy and tragicomedy. In Schopenhauer's (1969:252) view, tragedy deserves to be called 'the summit of poetic art', a view that claims a very important position for tragedy in literature. Yerima (2003:46) makes the relevant contribution that as a word, tragedy

comes from two Greek words, 'tragos' (goat) and 'ode' (song) and locates the origin of tragic drama in the 'celebration and worship of the Greek god, Dionysus, who was a god of nature and fertility [the three fecundity or Dionysian festivals were Lenaea, Rural, and the City of Great Dionysia] quite as much as the god of wine' and in ceremonial rites at the gravesides of culture-heroes and demi-gods.

Inversion and Major Highlights of Comedy

Comedy can also make good use of conflicts in plot development. However, comedy generally downplays conflicts and when employed, they are resolved in very decisive ways that push attention more towards an amiable state of affairs as a final outcome.Major determinants of comedy include the following: a main character does not suffer; if he or she does suffer, it will be briefly and as prelude to better times; hard times that might come to him or her could be deflected by actions and events to some other people; an amiable, comfortable or humorous state of affairs is given more attention; his emasculates suffering, fear and pity, and by implication renders catharsis irrelevant.

Inversion and Questioning of Aristotelian

Catharsis Inversion is constituted devoid of catharsis and even though it includes tragedy as one of its constituent streams, its cathartic aspect will have to be eliminated or nullified. Comedy, the other constituent stream, does not require catharsis since any conflict woven into it is amiably resolved before the end of the plot. Furthermore, catharsis cannot pretend to be indispensable for serious plots. Notwithstanding the humour, comedy can also effectively handle serious matters in drama.Aristotle could have recommended catharsis for tragic plots out of personal bias rather than from any inner logic of tragic sequences. Aristotle was nurtured in a Greek society evolving with increasing disposition towards military, ideological and territorial expansion beyond its borders, a factor that circumscribes the rise and fall of the Greek empire (circa 800–146 BCE).

In this wise, Aristotle's Greece was highly invested in a colonial and hegemonic mindset and would desire every conquered population to go on with their lives feeling pacified for surrendering to their new fate, hence catharsized after the tragedy of confrontation with a superior or luckier Greek army than nurse self-pity, fear and resentment, which predictably can motivate rebellion. This thinking probably inspired Aristotle to recommend catharsis for tragedy.

Conclusion

Aristotle and many other philosophers and literary writers have contributed so much towards better understanding of the interpenetration between philosophy, social criticism and literature. However, in zeroing in on tragedy and comedy as the only two major categories of life experiences and literature, they missed yet another major category, 'inversion'.

'Inversion' is a unit constituted equally by a full stream of tragedy and a full stream of comedy, the outcome being a state of affairs at once sad and happy, at once frustrating and fulfilling, at once tragedy and comedy and which is unlike tragicomedy.Detailed exploration of inversion has shown it has important areas of convergence with the others as well as important areas of divergence, which includes absence of catharsis in inverse plots. It is understood that the Aristotelian stipulation that tragic plots must have catharsis more likelyderived from Aristotle's socio-cultural bias and personal interests than from any inner logic of tragedy.

Recognition, use and critical exploration of inversion going forward will fill an age-old gap in literature and both broaden and enrich the purview of works of literature and literary criticism.

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