Existence, Emotion, and Expression: Tragic Elements Within Shakespearean Sonnets

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Tragic Elements Within Shakespearean Sonnets

[Tragedy is] the imitation of an action that is serious and also, as having magnitude, complete in itself; in appropriate and pleasurable language...in a dramatic rather than narrative form; with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish a catharsis of these emotions.

- A. Lonardo

When we sit down, as readers, and open a book, an unspoken agreement is created. Here, readers are making the conscious decision to become completely vulnerable and subject to the contents of a book, even if that means undergoing emotional manipulation. We call this pathos, or “the appeal to the emotions of the audience” (Corbett 86). As infamous writers go, an author who often flirted with the concept of pathos was Shakespeare and though many of his works are comedic—take A Midsummer Night's’ Dream, for example—many embody tragic elements as well. Though we could spend hours upon hours analysing the dozens of rhetorical schemes and tropes Shakespeare's work exemplifies, this essay will specifically identify tragic elements that evoke catharsis\(^1\) found within three of his poems. Specifically, Sonnets 15, 50, and 111 embody several rhetorical devices which ultimately relate situations of death, love, and life, to the reader. While some people read these sonnets as a required assignment for class, it is also important to acknowledge them for their emotional benefit upon the reader. Namely, in reading Shakespeare today, we undergo catharsis--a matter which is proven to be beneficial towards an audience.

\(^1\) Purgation. See page five for definition.
Beginning with Sonnet 15, Shakespeare fear of death is immediately conveyed by means of imagery. When Shakespeare writes, “When I consider every thing that grows/ Holds in perfection but a little moment” (as qtd. in Vendler 107) he is speaking about the impermanence of life. In using the rhetorical trope of personification, the reader is manipulated into creating a mental image that illustrates the smudge of time that each moment holds. According to Corbet, “personification... should be reserved for passages to stir the emotions” (443), which only enhances the emotional appeal. Continuing on, Shakespeare writes, “Where wasteful Time debateth with Decay” (11 as qtd. in Vendler 107). Obviously, this is a metaphor for the physical effect that time has on the human body because the intangible elements of time and decay could not possibly quarrel. Metaphor proves to be an effective example of rhetoric because it can illustrate an idea more clearly which, much like personification, paints a mental portrait. Another rhetorical strategy that can be noted in Sonnet 15 is antithesis which is in line 14 of the poem which reads, “As he takes from you, I engraft you new.” (13-14 as qtd. in Vendler 107). Antithesis is the “juxtaposition of contrasting ideas, often in parallel structure.... [which] can win for the author a reputation of wit” (Corbett 430). Through the use of personification, metaphor, and antitheses, Sonnet 15 successfully evokes the emotional response of fear as the thought of death creeps line by line into the readers mind. In doing so, we are forced to confront any personal issues with the matter.

In reading Sonnet 50, the audience is exposed to yet another tragic emotion-- pity. As Shakespeare expresses his sorrows over losing the beloved to distance, the audience is being manipulated into recalling any personal heartbreak. Beginning in line one, Shakespeare states “How heavy do I journey on the way...” (as qtd. in Vendler 247). In doing so, he practices the
rhetorical strategy of ellipsis in order to fit the scheme of ten syllables per line (iambic pentameter²). This line is also a prime example of diction that is high in context, meaning that the sentence forces participation upon the reader. Shakespeare continues his use of rhetorical devices in line five, writing “The beast that bares me, tiréd with my woe” (5 as qtd. in Vendler 247). Specifically practicing alliteration— or, “the repetition of initial or medial consonants in two or more adjacent words” (Corbett 434)— the word choice is played with as beast is paired with the word bare and an alliteration is born. Overall, this scheme of repetition ultimately enhances the sound of the poem which undoubtedly enhances readability. Once again playing into the overall sound of the poem, he ends the sonnet with a couplet stating “For that same groan doth put this in my mind:/ My grief lies onward and my joy behind” (13-14 as qtd. in Vendler 247). Much like in Sonnet 15, the rhetorical trope of antithesis is used and the comparison between the grief and joy is explicitly illustrated. In using ellipsis, alliteration, and antithesis throughout Sonnet 50, the sense of pathos is increased as the readers are placed into a poem that remind themselves of the pain they endured in heartbreak.

When looking at Sonnet 111, readers are subject, once again, to pity as Shakespeare describes a life of fame. In a situation that may have equated to today’s Kardashians, Shakespeare, too, struggles with the pressures of fame. In this sonnet, he uses language to prove the trials and tribulations of life as a star. Beginning with describing fame at the time, Shakespeare writes lines one through three as, “O for my sake do you with fortune chide,/ The guilty goddess of my harmful deeds,/ That did not better for my life provide” (as qtd. in Vendler 469). In these lines, a narrative is portrayed as his life is being scorned. In using the rhetorical

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² A verse scheme with five meters that alternates short and long syllables.
strategy of anastrophe— “inversion of the natural word order” (Corbett 431)— emphasis is placed on the beginning of the lines which ultimately makes the ideas between them connect. In reading this passage, Shakespeare ensures that the audience relates the idea of fortune’s harmful deeds being detrimental towards his life. Continuing on, he explicitly asks readers of the poem to pity him and his life for being consumed by the public’s eye. Shakespeare writes, “Thence comes it that my name receives a brand... Pity me then, and wish I were renewed” (5-8 as qtd. in Vendler). In doing so, Shakespeare actively practices the rhetorical scheme of climax as the situation becomes more and more uncontrollable in order to illustrate the hardships of his life.

Another example of rhetoric that is seen throughout Sonnet 111 is anaphora— “repetition of at the same word or word or group of words at the beginnings of successive clauses” (Corbett 435) which is seen when Shakespeare writes, “Pity me then, dear friend, and I assure ye/ Even your pity is enough cure me” (13-14 as qtd. in Vendler 469). This is an effective way to create pathos because it forces a word or phrase down a reader’s throat-- think pop music, for example. Anaphora is special because “the author has used it deliberately. Since the repetition of the words helps to establish a marked rhythm in the secret of the clauses, this scene is usually reserved for those passages where the author wants to produce a strong emotional effect” (Corbett 435). In reading Sonnet 111, the use of anastrophe, climax, and anaphora simply adds to the pathos of the passage as the feeling of pity for Shakespeare’s life is conveyed. This is a situation that can ultimately transfer into the personal lives of the readers because career trouble is often a relatable matter.

As written in *Pity and Fear in Greek Philosophy and Tragedy*, “a good poet ought to think about acting... Aristotle insists that actors and orators should convey emotions by
emotionally involving themselves” (Munteanu 80). In reading passages, today, we place ourselves in the position to act as orators. Think back to the audience’s thoughts on fearing death, feeling the sorrow of heartbreak, and pitying Shakespeare's career-- this was their involvement. In being subject to the creation of pathos, Shakespeare's sonnets can thrust us into becoming emotionally distraught. In analysing this form of rhetoric, Corbett writes that “we arouse emotion by contemplating the object that stirs the emotion” (88). For poetry, in particular, these memories can be rendered even more prominent. Another medium that flirts with the identification and recalling of emotions is songwriting. In a study concerning listening to music, conducted by Tuomas Eerola and Henna-Riikka Peltola at Durham University in the United Kingdom, “The results identified a consistent structure of three types of sadness experiences relevant to memorable events associated with music-related sadness...Grief-Stricken Sorrow, Comforting Sorrow, and Sublime Sorrow... [where] 40-56% of participants had sometimes experienced this type of emotion” (21). This is an overall beneficial reaction for the reader because, many times, it can be difficult to process an event by one’s self. This is the idea of catharsis and in reading the sonnets the audience is subject to undergoing such purgation.

Contrary to Greek Philosopher Plato, who argued that tragedy “stirred up potentially destructive passions” (Snyder 8), his student, Aristotle believed that tragedy3 could be beneficial to the audience. In terms of catharsis, “the Aristotelian idea ... relies on a medical model of purgation” (Ryden 256), meaning that the human body must go through the cleansing of negative emotion. For many people, dealing with death, heartbreak, and the uncertainties of life is no easy task so the catharsis that is evoked by the sonnets can even render healing. Recognising our

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3 See page one for definition.
emotions “is what enables public healing through witnessing as practiced by an ethical audience” (Ryden 252). This is the unspoken agreement that readers are subject to when opening a book--they give the author their time and, in return, the author helps them process feelings.

In reading Shakespearean sonnets, today, people are subject to feeling and processing the same emotions felt by others. In light of Aristotle's technical definition of tragedy, it is important to understand that “it is built on an understanding of what has been revealed by the natural evolution of poetry, as well as on a philosophical psychology of the nature of these emotions” (Halliwell 169). In understanding our emotions, we understand the world around us and when we read Shakespeare sonnets, we become mindful. As described by emotional intelligence journal, Law Student Wellbeing, “mindfulness of how we think is an important part of being able to reflect, without rumination, on how we feel” (James 223) meaning that putting ourselves in the situation and being subject to catharsis is actually healthy. More research on understanding the way we think and process emotion even suggests that students who do so will have a significant advantage in school over their peers that do not. Overall, it is important to allow ourselves to be subject to manipulation through the creation of pathos within the Shakespearean sonnets because it essentially evokes catharsis which is proven to be beneficial for us, as readers. With the help of the Greeks through plays and Shakespeare through sonnets, human beings are enabled to continue processing emotion as long as we continue to read.