

Tragedy “Teacheth the Uncertainty of this World.”

Dr. Gassim H. Dohal¹

Abstract

In *The Defense of Poesy*, Sir Philip Sidney argues that tragedy “teacheth the uncertainty of this world.” I will explore this statement in three important tragedies: Christopher Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus*, William Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *King Lear*. In these tragedies, there is the element of risk that is unpredictable, and has no measurable probability. Uncertainty, found in these works, may range from a falling short of certainty to an almost complete lack of definite knowledge especially about an outcome or result of an action or decision taken by a major character in the work in question. In major cases, it appears as if everything were taking place without a prior plan. In the titles I mentioned above, if any of the major characters knows the outcome of his/her decision in advance, s/he will not take such a decision. In my paper, I will demonstrate how the main characters’ risks in their actions have consequences in their lives and affect their future.

Keywords: Uncertainty, tragedy, *Doctor Faustus*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *King Lear*

In *The Defense of Poesy* (c. 1579-84), Sir Philip Sidney argues that tragedy “teacheth the uncertainty of this world” (118). This is a fair analysis of tragedies like Christopher Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus* (c. 1588-9), William Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra* (c. 1606-7), and *King Lear* (c. 1605-6). In these tragedies, there is the element of risk that is unpredictable, and has no measurable probability. Uncertainty in these works may range from a falling short of certainty to an almost complete lack of definite knowledge especially about an outcome or result of an action or decision taken by a major character in the work in question. In major cases, it appears as if everything were taking place without a prior plan. In the titles I mentioned above, if any of the major characters knows the outcome of his/her decision in advance, s/he will not take such a decision. I will try to explore the three tragedies listed above and how each “teacheth the uncertainty of this world” in the following few pages. In Christopher Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus*, Doctor Faustus thinks that he will have the power he dreams of, but he does not pay attention to the fact that the power he is seeking is a fake, a disguised power that will have limits and will end. In other words, he is thinking of his present, and is not worried about the consequences of his decision. It is not surprising that, at last, he is a Renaissance person who is deceived by his blind belief in the power of his world. Faustus is intoxicated with the rapid expansion of knowledge at his time, and filled with pride in the power of the human mind. This power is countered by the Christian faith where man’s knowledge and power are nothing in comparison to God’s. Faustus does what the devils have done; he rejects God’s supremacy, and challenges God’s grace for knowledge and power. But he does not realize that this rejection and challenge will lead him to his destruction. He is self-deceived; he becomes unaware of the reality and certainty of his situation. Otherwise, he will not give his soul for trifles. Who can believe that a great German philosopher sinks to the level of petty tricks, and finally consoles himself by conjuring up Helen of Troy—who is really only a devil in disguise? As a matter of fact, at the beginning of the play Faustus arrives at truths—the limitations of his knowledge and power—that he lays out before himself for examinations. As a Renaissance person, these truths call out in him new questions and contradictions.

¹ English Department, College of Languages & Translation, Imam Moh’med bin Saud Islamic University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.
Email: dr_waitme@hotmail.com

In his speeches and soliloquies, the voice of doubt and irresolution has taken the place of argument for a specific plan or studied sequences. It is the soliloquy of doubt and uncertainty of a Renaissance man we find through the play until at last the moment of justice comes. At this moment, we have a true soliloquy, the utterance of a tragic hero who gains self-knowledge at the moment when he has no chance to correct his mistakes:

The devil will come, and Faustus must be damn'd.
Or, I'll leap up to my God! —Who pulls me down?
(XIX. 151-52).

This quotation shows how this man has not been thinking of this moment before.

Anyhow, at the end his pride turns to despair since he has wasted his time in irresolution. His life and death are a warning of a man caught between two worlds: Renaissance pride and Christian faith, a man who adopts, practices, and indeed lives one world, unaware and uncertain of the result of his decision. It is Faustus's tragedy that his aims so consume him as to blind him to his actual case. He deceives and dramatizes himself until he is left at the end with nothing but despair. If he knows or expects from the beginning that this will be his end, he would not carry out such an action. To make a long story short, Faustus, who began by expressing confidence in his power to manipulate time, ends by his expressing his desire to hold up its course: "That time may cease, and midnight never come" (XIX. 44). As a matter of fact, the complexity of Faustus's moral nature is more like that of any Renaissance man, and out of it he spins the thread of his unplanned, unknown tragic fate. Another tragedy that teaches the uncertainty of this world is William Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*. In this play, we find the characters' lack of definite knowledge about any sequences of their decisions and actions. What seems certain and planned in Rome turns out to become uncertain and happens naturally in Egypt. From the very beginning of the tragedy, Rome is seen and depicted as prudent, disciplined, and representing conquest while Egypt represents fertility, pleasure, and love. A reader will expect the play to end as it began, stressing this statement. But what happens is something else where the Egyptian Queen becomes a tragic heroine. According to a Roman view, their admired military leader is enslaved, not to the acknowledged Queen of Egypt, but to a strumpet, a mere gypsy. Yet Shakespeare has contrived to present Cleopatra in all her infinite variety—coquettish, even at times shrewish, but still a noble empress, descended of royal kings on the contrary of the Roman point of view. Ironically, it is Antony who is seen as torn between his military interests and his emotional ones; at times indecisive and vacillating. He never takes advantage of his supreme military power on land and decides, out of vanity, to fight on sea. There is no certitude of the consequences of what he is doing. As a veteran military leader, he is not expected to get involved in a battle for his opponent dares him to do so. At the battle of Actium, he surrenders his military advantage to follow the fleeing Cleopatra. Things happen uncertainly. There is no specific plan to be followed; trying different ways to live peacefully becomes the ultimate goal of a great leader who is not expected to accept any disdain.

Being defeated in the battle, Antony then sues Caesar for permission to live in Athens as a private man. When his suit is refused, he offers to settle the war "sword against sword" (III. Xiii. 36). It seems that when he falls in love with the queen, he is uncertain that his love will lead him to such an end. Love is lower than honor in the Roman world, but Shakespeare depicts love as a natural force with its natural laws that can defeat any power that stands in front of it. Antony is a hero set free from the limits of heroism by a love, which frees him from a commitment to honor for a commitment to life. The certitude of his liberation is also his humiliation and destruction. Things go unplanned and uncertain. Hence, Antony's destruction becomes the outcome. On the other hand, Cleopatra is seen as politically shrewd and decisive. She withdraws her fleet leaving the battle for two Roman colonial powers to consume each other. A colonized country like Egypt is neither expected nor planned for to take such an action. Her withdrawal determines the outcome of the battle because Antony follows her leaving the battleground for his enemy. It appears that events are taking place without anticipation or plan. More than this is the end of both main characters; Antony's death is seen as unheroic, a tragic waste whereas Cleopatra's death is seen as a triumph. The contrary should take place at least from the Roman point of view: who says that a strumpet turns to symbolize the triumph whereas a hero's end turns to be a waste? If there is a plan and certainty, a military leader is to achieve a heroic deed at the end for himself and his nation, while such a queen should be marched in Caesar's triumphant procession in Rome.

On the contrary, Out of her discretion, she kills herself instead of being humiliated or enslaved by the Romans. She has already realized that going to Rome would mean more humiliation not only for herself, but for her people as well.

However, the reality of Cleopatra's character is conveyed in the following lines:

Then put my tires and mantles on him, whilst
I wore his Sword Philippan (II. V. 28-29).

The man who rules half of the world has been reduced to masking in women's clothes. This is not the end of a leader whose decisions and actions are studied and planned. It is the end of one whose actions have passed through some sort of chaos where there is no plan taken to determine the consequences of any act. Another example of the uncertain consequences of taking decisions is King Lear's decision at the beginning of William Shakespeare's King Lear. Though his decision to divide his kingdom among his daughters seems foolish, yet no one expects that his decree will lead to the result with it the tragedy ends. In addition, he seems that he has no little doubt in his daughters' loyalty. On the contrary, the unexpected becomes true in this tragedy: the wicked prosper, the innocents are banished. Things just happen; there is no clear plan or design that will lead to specific consequences and results. Indeed, King Lear has not looked beneath the surface. He has let the ritual appearances replace the internal reality or he has at least refused to distinguish between the two. The certainty of his end is neither planned nor expected. At the beginning, King Lear is full of authority and assurance as he makes his regal way through the court. He reveals his intention to divide his kingdom among his daughters out of his excessive confidence in his daughters and in his long reign. His speech and ritual ceremony at the beginning suggest a power that demonstrates the stability and certainty of long, unchallenged reign. However, this is exactly what Lear anticipates because of his excessive confidence in the love of his daughters. The daughter with an ingenuous love who refuses to pretend in front of her father is banished. Lear is not certain of the consequences of his action. In deciding and performing the act of dividing his kingdom, an act which seems both reasonable and generous for a person in King Lear's position, Lear sets in motion a chain of events which show his vulnerabilities not only as a king and a father but also as a man. Though it is foolish to expect to divest oneself of power and responsibility and yet retain the trappings of authority, it is uncertain that his reward will be filial ingratitude. But he is mistaken in expecting kind treatment of his daughters. While their father expects them to run the country safely and peacefully, their real nature appears on the surface after usurping the power. His two wicked daughters, as if they strove to exceed each other in cruelty to their old father, who had been so good to them, by little and little will have abated him of all his train, and all respect.

From a king to a beggar, from commanding millions to being without one attendant is a hard change. Lear does not expect his elder daughters to reduce him to the condition of a ragged, homeless madman. No one expects that the king's risky decision to divide his kingdom will lead to such an end. But as two ruthless powers, his elder daughters manipulate his naivety, ignorance, and misunderstanding of the reality of human nature. The uncertainty of this world is also presented in the death of Cordelia, which is troublesome; because she is the innocent victim of the evil that surrounds her. Whoever reads the play for the first time will expect this character to be rewarded at the end. But Shakespeare refuses to save her just because the message to save her is too late. The dramatist here seems to represent the ruthless consequences of the evil and chaos in this world. The play seems to show that Lear's decision to divide his kingdom is a mistake since such a division will lead to chaos. The chaos does not need to be planned or anticipated. There is nothing certain about chaos. In conclusion, the three tragedies Doctor Faustus, Antony and Cleopatra, and King Lear teach the uncertainty of this world as Sir Philip Sidney claims in The Defense of Poesy. There is an element of risk in all actions taken by the main characters. Doctor Faustus's soliloquies show how this doctor lives in doubt and irresolution. He is not the person who is worried about plans and consequences; he is the one who is proud of his humanistic power of knowledge. Like Faustus is Antony, the Roman leader in Antony and Cleopatra. Everything seems to be planned and anticipated until he falls in love with the Egyptian Queen. After that things happen naturally and without fixed direction. His love appears to free him from any limitations or arrangements. What becomes important for him is just to live his private life. When he is denied so, he commits suicide. On the contrary, Cleopatra proves that she is a heroine. She is not merely a wanton, but she is a shrewd politician. Finally, the decision taken by King Lear of King Lear is not far away from Faustus's. Lear's decision sets in motion a chain of events, which manifest his daughters' tyranny and show his vulnerability as a human being.

Works Cited

- Bennett, Andrew and Nicholas Royle. Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory. 3rd ed. Pearson Longman, 2004.
- Marlow, christopher. Doctor Faustus, Drama of the english Renaissance. Ed. M. L. Wine. New York: Random house, Inc., 1969.
- Shakespeare, William. Antony and Cleopatra. The Complete Works of Shakespeare. 4th ed. Ed. David Bevington. Longman, 1997.
- . King Lear. The Complete Works of Shakespeare. 4th ed. Ed. David Bevington. Longman, 1997.
- Sidney, Sir Philip. An Apology for poetry or the Defense of Poesy. London: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd., 1965.
- Spingarn, J. E. A History of Literary Criticism in the Renaissance. 1920. Reprint. London: Forgotten Books, 2013.