

Thomas, I received your exam. You did well, especially on the first question! You were a bit hard on Miranda, but of course you are a tad cynical 😊! You earned 98/100 for the exam

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'Tis but a Man Gone

The essence of tragedy is its concern with humanity. The purpose of every tragedy is to horrify and shock the viewing audience, not for the simple inducement of a cheap thrill, but rather for the purgation of fear and trembling. The normative definition of tragedy was established by Aristotle in his Poetics, which described the genre as having "incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish the catharsis of such emotions" (Abrams 331). Tragedy is therefore always intended to be didactic in nature, with the thrust of the narrative angled in the direction of teaching a moral lesson. A central theme to all of William Shakespeare's tragedies is one of disorder; his favorite thematic imagery was that of an unweeded garden, abandoned to "things rank and gross in nature" (Ham. I.ii.135-7). Living in an era of rapid social change, Shakespeare's tragedies are all attempts to resolve the cultural and moral decay that his keen mind observed in his daily environment. In these plays, these iniquitous forces are often expressed allegorically in the form of villains. These figures are the catalysts for the downward momentum of each play, guiding the events of the complication to a horrid conclusion. In the midst of this carnage, however, are obvious ethical polestars, designed to guide the audience. If one rejects such behavior, states the playwright, such a terrible fate will not befall you. Most of Shakespeare's tragedies follow this pattern. More troubling (and perhaps more interesting) are the ones which do not, such as Hamlet and Othello. For the audiences watching these plays,

good

excellent

easy lessons about living properly and honorably within the social matrix can be gleaned from the evil trajectories of a Macbeth or an Edmund; their sins are explicable and in a certain sense relatable. Less concrete, however, are those derived from the existence of a true moral nihilist such as we find in Iago. Indeed, it can be argued that when opposed by someone totally incapable of human compassion, no tragedy can fulfill its didactic promise because no lessons on how to avoid the unfortunate denouement are available. Utilizing Max Weber's sociological theory on the four types of action, the characters of Macbeth and Edmund will be compared to Iago in order to determine whether The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice actually helps society deal with rising levels of disorder, and whether or not it ought to be considered a tragedy at all.

true

good

In modern times, theorists and researchers have given readers a multitude of analytical schemes to use when attempting to explain the behaviors of certain characters. One could easily spend several hundred pages using Marxian theories on class tensions to expand upon the behavior of a Lear or a Timon. It would be just as profitable, perhaps, to use Merton's Strain Theory to dissect Macbeth. The psychological or sociological theory one uses to explain the actions of other people often has far more to do with the analyzer than the subject of that analysis, and this reality is compounded by the relative brevity of Shakespeare's plays. The more the reader is allowed access to the inner workings of a character's mind, the easier it becomes to settle on a suitable theory of behavior. Given the multitude of theoretical frameworks available, it is perhaps simpler to remove oneself from the mind of the character, and seek only to analyze the exterior behavior as potential hints at what lies under the surface. One of the most important descriptions of pure action analysis available today

can be found in the writings of the German sociologist Max Weber.

Weber's view on action is based on an important distinction in all sociologies of everyday life between behavior and action. Both involve what people do on an everyday basis, but behavior occurs with little or no thought, while action is the result of conscious processes. Weber was not concerned with behavior; his focus was on action in which thought intervened between stimulus and response. In other words, Weber was only interested in situations where people attach meaning to what they do. Weber defined sociology as the study of action in terms of its subjective meaning. What matters to him are people's conscious processes, and he also believed that what people believe about a situation is more important in understanding the actions they take than the objective situation in which they find themselves (Mitzman, 91-94).

One major component of Weber's work became his famous distinction among four basic types of action. Affectual action is action that is the result of emotion. As this is a non-rational type of action, it interested Weber very little. An example of this sort of action found in Shakespeare would be the murder of Emilia at Iago's hands. Indeed, this is the only act by this villain in the entire play that is non-rational. Also non-rational is traditional action, in which what is done is based on the ways things have been done habitually or customarily. Passing one's property to a first-born son instead of one's bastard (as did Gloucester to Edgar) or crossing oneself in church are examples of this type of action. Although traditional action was of some interest to Weber, he was far more interested in the other two types of action, both of which are rational (Kalberg, 276).

Value-rational action occurs when an actor's choice of the best means to an end is chosen on the basis of the actor's

interesting

good

✓

belief in some larger set of values (Mitzman, 96). This may not be the optimal choice, but it is rational from the point of view of the value system in which the actor finds herself. Performing some action in obedience to conceptions of Elizabethan nobility would be an example of value-rational action found in multiple plays from this era.

Means-end rational action involved the pursuit of ends that the actor has chosen for himself; thus, his action is not guided by some larger value system (Ringer, 341-2). It is, however, affected by the actor's view of the environment in which he finds himself, including the behavior of people and objects in it. This simply means that actors must take into account the nature of their situation when choosing the best means to an end (Ringer, 343). These four types of actions are ideal types. The fact is that one rarely if ever finds action that is solely within one of these four types, but actors can be grouped into categories based on a pattern of behavior, with deep insights into their natures available as a result. *fascinating*

One hallmark of Shakespeare's tragicomic villains is that they exhibit increasing levels of means-end rational action. This is clearly a result of elevated levels of social isolation, a progressive divorcing from a previous position embedded in the social hierarchy. Iago clearly separates himself from other major villains in the opus because from the very first act, it is clear that he has precisely zero connection to anyone in his environment. In the beginning of Macbeth, we find the general triumphant over the rebel Macdonwald. He is a valued member of Scottish society, clearly expecting social promotion from his deeds on the field of battle. At this point of the play, Macbeth's actions are divided chiefly between traditional actions and value-rational ones: he is a product of a certain culture, and all

of his behavior conforms to the societal norms set by that culture. Some modern readers might be morally repulsed by his violent heroics, but it cannot be said of the Thane that he is an evil man. *true!*

good

The catalyst for downfall in this play comes in the form of the three Weïrd Sisters. If viewed literally, Macbeth's situation becomes a truly pitiable one: bound by fate, his decisions - although clearly negative and worthy of condemnation - become somewhat deterministic and out of his control. In Shakespeare's day, the belief in witches was widespread. It is even possible, according to Victor Kiernan, that the Bard believed in spirits and witchcraft, his enlightened mind notwithstanding (135). As an artist, however, Shakespeare clearly stated on numerous occasions that the supernatural has no objective existence and no independent meaning. The witches are therefore symbolic of an inner dialectic between two halves of himself (much in the same way Ivan Karamazov dialogued with the devil in Dostoevsky's famous work). There are also allegorical connections between this act and the purported "fall of man" found in Genesis; the reader is instantly reminded that Adam was convinced to sin by his wife, herself influenced by the devil. Seen in this manner, Macbeth becomes truly responsible for what comes later, and the purpose of tragedy is saved.

Macbeth is a man clearly at war with himself. Despite being an apparently potent warrior, he feels the need to consistently prove his manhood to his wife. While Macbeth first conceived of the idea of seizing power, it was his wife who pushed him out of the world of thoughts into pure action. Macbeth's gateway sin was that of ambition, one easily understood to a contemporary audience. While the feudal thirst for power is not precisely equivalent to the bourgeois lust for wealth, the similarities

make the lessons of Macbeth apparent to all. ✓

Duncan is presented as something of the perfect monarch, and his death at the hands of the Thane of Cawdor places the latter on a path towards utter nihilism. This process, however, is gradual, with Macbeth only feeling murderous at night, and clearly plagued by his decisions. The heart of the play's catharsis is found in these scenes: whatever happens later, these actions are the cause of the downfall; avoiding them will help guarantee that Macbeth's end is not shared by anyone in the audience. Macbeth is not a figure of pure evil, but merely a man in the midst of a horrid transition. Despite the trajectory of this downward spiral, Macbeth is always aware of the nature of his actions. Even before the slaying of Duncan, Macbeth states that

...in these cases
 We still have judgement here; that but we teach
 Bloody instructions, which being taught return
 To plague the inventor: This even-handed justice
 Commends the ingredients of our poison'd chalice
 To our own lips. (I.vii.7-12)

There is an iron form of karma at work here, and Macbeth seeks to defend himself by new murders and acts of violence. As he comes to be fascinated with crime, his distance from the social web increases, and so do his means-end actions. Even in the midst of this transition, Macbeth is aware of his actions, and takes pride in his almost pathological fixation on overcoming mere humanity. These are lines almost quoted verbatim in several of Nietzsche's works on the ubermensch, and the philosopher's warnings about the the descent into nihilism would have profited Macbeth greatly. Macbeth clearly understood what Mozart meant when he wrote "Ein Mensch zu sein," or, to be truly a man is high enough aim, but he rejected this goal as insufficient. When Macbeth states

I dare do all that may become a man;
 Who dares do more is none - (I.vii.46-7)

Mensch

he seems very much aware of the fact that certain lines cannot be crossed and returned from; once a type of actions are committed, one is no longer just a man. By this point, few lessons can be learned from the play. All that remains is to depose the tyrant, and to allow the horror of the denouement to strike home. For all the evil done, the lessons of the play are fairly low-hanging fruit, accesible to even the densest of peons in the pit. Central to any ethical lesson is the availability of choice; for all the evil done at Macbeth's hands, he might have chosen differently. Macbeth is a tragedy for this very reason.

excellent

Edmund from King Lear is smilar to Iago in that they are fellow rationalists who overreach themselves, but Edmund is nowhere nearly as bereft of conscience as Othello's ancient. In addition to being an example of Shakespeare's commentary that there was something rotten with the state of the family in contemporary England, Edmund is a necessary foil to Edgar, and sets the latter up for the most important transformation in any of the Bard's plays. Though his evil is less damaging than Macbeth's on a societal scale, he is a more frightening figure, and one more difficult to deal with when looking for lessons on morality. His sin - like Macbeth's - is one of ambition, but his methods are very different. No tyrant lord, Edmund is evil perfectly disguised, the proverbial wolf in sheep's clothing. He is a more sinister figure than Macbeth due to his rationality. To a certain extent, audiences find villains who are slavering monsters easier to deal with because the differences between the two are so vast. With Edmund, that distance is uncomfortably reduced. The root of his ambition stems from his denigrated position as the bastard son of the Earl of Gloucester. It was a patently absurd fact of life in Elizabethan England that such offspring were unable

true

good points

to inherit from their fathers. Edmund's anger therefore has a rational root, and the ability of the audience to identify with his evil adds to the fear he engenders, and also presents viewers with a direct avenue to the purgation needed to qualify Lear as a tragedy. ✓

Unlike Macbeth, Edmund actually begins the play using means-end rational thinking, and slowly moves into value-rational thinking as the play progresses. This is particularly interesting because at the outset, Edmund heaps disdain on the nobility, and like Faulconbridge makes a virtue of his "base" blood. Instead, he appeals to Nature, by which he means the law of the jungle, and comes to embody the new morality of his day. (This is doubly fascinating since Shakespeare himself was undoubtedly amongst the first to undermine the old system, so often glorified in his works. Disparities such as these are among the reasons these plays have stayed relevant for more than four centuries.) As Edmund assumes power in the wake of Edgar's disappearance, he comes to embody some of the old traditions that so recently disgusted him. A purely rational Edmund would never have dueled Edgar, since the latter was a cipher, his rank unknown. An Edmund buying into the values of a class which once rejected him, however, believed his own hype and perished for it. Mortally wounded, Edmund is touched by remorse, and the brothers "exchange charity" (V.iii.165). The cause of this remorse proves that Edmund's evil was in response to feelings of inferiority and isolation, rather than making him an exemplar of pure malevolence. The source of this change in attitudes is also a clue to the fact that Edmund is not a pure sociopath, in that it was the (twisted) love of Goneril and Regan that reduced his distance from humanity: "yet Edmund was beloved" (V.iii.238). Whatever his sins, Edmund

*excellent
character
reading*

was a normal man much oppressed, his choices understandable, and therefore his downfall clearly didactic and therefore tragic.

good

In Iago we are dealing with a completely different type of monster. Love was a sensation totally alien to Iago, unwanted and unlooked for. Neither does the term "honest," which along with "honesty" occurs 52 times in the play. Unlike Macbeth or Edmund, there is no discernible source for Iago's evil. It is clear that he feels that he is underappreciated by Othello, and that he deserved the position given to Cassio. This is an explanation, but one clearly insufficient to explain Iago's hatred. This type of remorseless, callous behavior does not occur instantly in a vacuum, so any immediate cause fails to explain its root. Iago only employs means-end rational thinking; he is not a character sliding along a spectrum towards nihilism, but rather a man already arrived and comfortable at the age of 28. In modern times, Iago is referred to as a psychopath or sociopath, a condition referred to by mental health professionals as Antisocial Personality Disorder, or 301.7 in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual. The qualification checklist for APD consists of:

- A. There is a pervasive pattern of disregard for and violation of the rights of others occurring since age 15 years, as indicated by three (or more) of the following:
 - (1) failure to conform to social norms with respect to lawful behaviors as indicated by repeatedly performing acts that are grounds for arrest
 - (2) deceitfulness, as indicated by repeated lying, use of aliases, or conning others for personal profit or pleasure
 - (3) impulsivity or failure to plan ahead
 - (4) irritability and aggressiveness, as indicated by repeated physical fights or assaults
 - (5) reckless disregard for safety of self or others
 - (6) consistent irresponsibility, as indicated by repeated failure to sustain consistent work behavior or honor financial obligations
 - (7) lack of remorse, as indicated by being indifferent to or rationalizing having hurt, mistreated, or stolen from another
- B. The individual is at least age 18 years.

C. There is evidence of Conduct Disorder with onset before age 15 years.
 D. The occurrence of antisocial behavior is not exclusively during the course of Schizophrenia or a Manic Episode.

Iago's existence is defined as one of total self-serving; he is a man apart from all others. Though he is respected by Cassio and Othello, he is incapable of receiving this affection. To him, the weak belong pressed against the wall, a philosophy best stated in his comment that "All guiltless, meet reproach" (IV.i.47). Exiled from human kindness, Iago symbolizes the new, embryonic values coming to the fore in Shakespeare's day. Clearly, the audience is being warned about predatory capitalism, and those who rise by merit without considering anyone else. He is a microcosm for the Venice of the play (an allegory for London): a magnificent exterior masking a core of corruption. *good*

Macbeth tires of life before the walls of Dunsinane, the emotional bill for his actions coming due; Edmund repents of his errors at the hour of his death. Iago will have none of this awkward sentimentality. His final actions are to slay his wife (his only non-rational action in the entire play, and one which begs the question about why exactly he married in the first place, unless it was to further his disguise) and then to seal his lips. In his silence he gives none of the victims of his actions any explanations, the last wound he can inflict. Considering Iago had more lines than anyone else in the play, this silence is particularly powerful. *excellent!*

Those looking for moral instruction must be somewhat unsettled when watching Othello. If the protagonist has a hamartia, it is that he doesn't trust his wife enough. The Venice of the play could not have been a racially liberal location, and black Othello must have been inundated with negative comments and glances. Add to this the fact that he was far older than Desdemona, and

it is clear that any man might have been concerned about marital infidelity when presented with the same scenario. If Othello is a tragedy, it is saved by this weakness in the great general. It is more difficult, however, to understand what he might have done differently, and what the audience might do in order to apply the lessons of the play. A true moral nihilist cannot be reasoned with. He might be bargained with to a certain extent (if one's goals happened to run in the same direction, for instance), but there is no way to minimize the potentiality for evil that his existence represents. Morality is entirely created by the relationship of one person to another person; a man apart has no loyalty to the social matrix, and therefore can only utilize means-end rational actions. Many critics have expressed their dismay at this play, most notably Granville-Barker when he stated that Othello was a "tragedy without meaning." Iago can only be looked at as a symptom of a social malady, one slowly creeping onto the scene in Shakespeare's time. If there is a catharsis to the horror Iago represents, it comes only with the arrival of a sense of defensive cynicism in one's fellow man. A society which acts in this manner on a grand scale has truly dissolved the social bonds which once held it together. Perhaps that is the true root of the fear Iago represents: a Macbeth or an Edmund can be killed by the sword, but an Iago has the power to ruin an entire culture by merely existing. Even in death, Iago seems to win, his effect always impactful. It is remarkable that four centuries later, modern man is no closer to solving the riddle Iago represents, or minimizing the harm to society that he is capable of. Indeed, the true horror may be that when it comes to the sociopath, only raw, unmitigated violence is capable of stopping him, yet another victory for his very mode of existence.

So true

Wow, Thomas, you never cease to surprise me with the depth of your knowledge and your ability to present it intelligently. I do not know much about Weber, but you set out your points and your support clearly, concisely →

and convincingly!

You earned an A for English 403.

If you are in British Lit I, I will be again your teacher, and I am excited to work with you again.

There may be some duplicate material, and the book is about as large and heavy as the Shakespeare text ☺! Let's hope that you may keep both.

"See" you in the next course. And I know you will finish by June. Have you started Mazel's course?

Have a good week,

Dr. Daley

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