

Bradley, A. C. *Shakespearean Tragedy*, 2nd ed. London: MacMillan, 1932.
page references below are to this edition.

Synopsis of Lecture I: Substance of Shakespearean Tragedy

Preliminary Definition: a Shakespearean tragedy is a story of exceptional calamity leading to the death of a man in high estate.

The "story" or "action" does not consist solely of human actions or deeds; but deeds (in the full sense of "human acts") are the predominant factor. The center of the tragedy may be said with equal truth to lie in action issuing from character, or in character issuing in action.

Besides the strictly human acts of his characters, Shakespeare does at times admit abnormal conditions of mind, the intervention of the supernatural, and chance happenings. These elements are realistic enough, but more to the point—they do not interfere with the causal link between character-deed-catastrophe:

Thus it appears that these three elements in the "action" are subordinate, the dominant factor consists in deeds which issue from character. So that, by the way of summary, we may now alter our first statement...and we may say instead (what in its turn is one-sided, though less so) that the story is one of human actions producing exceptional calamity and ending in the death of such a man (16)

The action involves CONFLICT--between opposed factions, between opposed individuals, but most of all between opposed forces within the soul of the tragic hero:

The truth is, that the type of tragedy in which the hero opposes to a hostile force an undivided soul, is not the Shakespearean type. The soul of those who contend with the hero may be thus undivided; they generally are; but, as a rule, the hero, though he pursues his fated way, is, at least at some point in the action, and sometimes at many, torn by an inward struggle; and it is frequently at such points that Shakespeare shows his most extraordinary power. (18)

TRAGIC HERO--he is always an exceptional person, of high degree and public importance, and his actions and sufferings are of an unusual kind. He is not a paragon or an eccentric; he is made of the same human nature all of us share, but in him it is raised to a high degree.

In almost all [tragic heroes] we observe a marked one-sidedness, a predisposition in some particular direction; a total incapacity, in certain circumstances, or resisting the force which draws in this direction; a fatal tendency to identify the whole being with one interest, object, passion, or habit of mind. This, it would seem, is, for Shakespeare, the fundamental tragic trait (20).

The hero's tragic greatness, in the circumstances in which he is placed, is also his TRAGIC FLAW. It leads him to err, by action or omission; and his error, joining with other causes, brings on him ruin.