

Banha University - Faculty of Education-
English Department
2nd. Grade
Drama
1st. Semester- 2013/2014

Respond to **TWO ONLY** of the Following Questions:

1. “The models of tragedy which influenced Shakespeare and his contemporaries were not Greek but Roman and Late medieval.” Discuss.

Answer:

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The models of tragedy which influenced Shakespeare and his contemporaries were not Greek (the great tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides) but Roman and late-medieval: that is, the sensational and highly rhetorical plays of Seneca (apparently written for recitation), and the narrative verse tragedies popularized in England by John Lydgate’s fifteenth-century *The Fall of Princes* and by the sixteenth-century, multi-authored collection known as *The Mirror for Magistrates* (1559). Written in the shadow of the emperor Nero, Seneca’s tragedies are characterized by a preoccupation with horrific crimes and the tyrannical abuse of power. His protagonists are driven to murder by inordinate passions such as vengeful rage, lust, and sexual jealousy; most of them, too, unlike most of Shakespeare’s heroes, are conscious wrongdoers. But they are driven by passions which seem humanly uncontrollable (ghosts, Furies, and meddling divinities spur them on) and are often cursed by the consequences of evils rooted in the past; thus despite their energies and their wilfulness they seem more the victims than the responsible agents of their fate. Another common characteristic is their compellingly assertive sense of selfhood; this may exemplify the Stoic notion of an indestructible personal identity (as in *Hercules Oetaeus*) but more often it is a perversion of that ideal (as in *Thyestes* and *Medea*). Seneca’s tragic heroes and heroines

see their crimes as defiant expressions of self and unfold this impassioned selfhood in long and rhetorically elaborate monologues and soliloquies. Like their victims, they regularly hyperbolize their feelings by projecting them on to the 'sympathetic universe' and by calling in rage, grief, or despair for nature to revolt against earth, for primal Chaos to come again.¹³

The Fall of Princes narratives shared Seneca's fascination with power and its abuse. Like him too, but far more insistently, they emphasized the insecurity of high places and the rule of fortune or mutability in worldly affairs: indeed, in these narratives the notion of tragedy is almost reducible to that of catastrophic change. Moreover, fortune and its capricious turns are now explained in Christian terms as a consequence of the Adamic Fall, which brought change and misery into the world. Thus the treacheries of fortune are afflictions which everyone is liable to, irrespective of his or her moral condition. The main concern of the *Mirror* authors, however, was political as well as ethical: to show that fortune is an instrument of divine justice exacting retribution for the crimes of tyrannical rulers and over-ambitious or rebellious subjects.

Tragic theory in the sixteenth century consisted mainly of a set of prescriptive rules derived from Senecan and Fall of Princes practice. Critics such as Puttenham and Sidney emphasized that tragedy is 'high and excellent' in subject and style, does not meddle with base (i.e., domestic and plebeian) matters or mingle kings and clowns. It uncovers hidden corruption and shows the characteristic conduct and the deserved punishments of tyrants. Dealing

2. Shakespeare was so masterly a playwright, and had so wonderful a power of giving life to unpromising subjects." Comment.

Answer:

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Shakespeare was so masterly a playwright, and had so wonderful a power of giving life to unpromising subjects, that to a large extent he was able to

surmount this difficulty. But illustrations of it are easily to be found in his tragedies, and it is not always surmounted. In almost all of them we are conscious of that momentary pause in the action, though, as we shall see, it does not generally occur *immediately* after the crisis. Sometimes he allows himself to be driven to keep the hero off the stage for a long time while the counter-action is rising; Macbeth, Hamlet and Coriolanus during about 450 lines, Lear for nearly 500, Romeo for about 550 (it matters less here, because Juliet is quite as important as Romeo). How can a drama in which this happens compete, in its latter part, with *Othello*? And again, how can deliberations between Octavius, Antony and Lepidus, between Malcolm and Macduff, between the Capulets, between Laertes and the King, keep us at the pitch, I do not say of the crisis, but even of the action which led up to it? Good critics—writers who have criticised Shakespeare's dramas from within, instead of applying to them some standard ready-made by themselves or derived from dramas and a theatre of quite other kinds than his—have held that some of his greatest tragedies fall off in the Fourth Act, and that one or two never wholly recover themselves. And I believe most readers

would find, if they examined their impressions, that to their minds *Julius Caesar*, *Hamlet*, *King Lear* and [58]*Macbeth* have all a tendency to 'drag' in this section of the play, and that the first and perhaps also the last of these four fail even in the catastrophe to reach the height of the greatest scenes that have preceded the Fourth Act. I will not ask how far these impressions are justified. The difficulties in question will become clearer and will gain in interest if we look rather at the means which have been employed to meet them, and which certainly have in part, at least, overcome them.

(In all of these instances excepting that of *Hamlet* the scene of the counter-stroke is at least as exciting as that of the crisis, perhaps more so. Most people, if asked to mention [59]the scene that occupies the *centre* of the action

3. Write briefly on:

- **Character and characterization.**

The character is the name of a literary genre; it is a short, and usually witty, sketch in prose of a distinctive type of person.

- **Act and Scene.**

An act is a major division in the action of a play. Acts are often subdivided into scenes, which in modern plays usually consist of units of action in which there is no change of place or break in the continuity of time.