

THE FLIES: A TRAGEDY OR AN EXISTENTIALIST DRAMA? \*

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Literary creation relies not only on originality but also, and mainly, on the retaking of a subject matter that undergoes a different treatment according to the different Zeitgeist in which it originates. "Again and again dramatists have retold the ancient stories and have adapted them to a contemporary setting or have interpreted them in the light of contemporary thought," as Clifford Leech has it.<sup>1</sup> Greek mythology, especially, has been proved to be an inexhaustible source of subject matter for Western writers of all times. From the classic Greek to contemporary playwrights, the Hellenic myths have been put to use recurrently so as to satisfy the particular needs of an author and his audience. A deliberate variation in mood may occur, which, instead of diminishing the effect, enhances it through the very difference in treatment. Such is the case of the myth of Orestes and his sister Electra, who avenge Agammon, their father, by killing Clitemnestra, their mother, and Aegistus, her lover. It was explored by Aeschylus in The Libation Bearers, by Eurypedes

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and Sophocles in their respective Electra, and more modernly, by T. S. Eliot in The Family Reunion, O'Neill in Mourning Becomes Electra, and Sartre in The Flies.

In addition to sharing a theme, these plays have in common the fact of having been labeled 'tragedies.' At first sight, the use of the myth might mislead the reader into granting them a tragic status. Modern theorists, like Hegel, Scheler, and Falk, however, have cast a new light upon Aristotle's primordial concept of tragedy. Traditional parameters have been re-evaluated and others, focusing on the human dimension of the tragic hero, have been brought into consideration. If such parameters be taken into account, not all of the so-called 'tragedies' are entitled to such categorization. Such is the case of Sartre's The Flies, which bears some of the characteristics of tragedies but does not prove to be one when compared with the concepts of the theorists afore mentioned.<sup>2</sup>

On the formalistic grounds of Aristotle's Poetics, tragedy is defined as

an imitation of an action that is serious, complete and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions.<sup>3</sup>

As far as the Aristotelian definition is concerned, The Flies fulfills some of the requisites of the tragic form, but falls short of satisfying others. It is a serious action, complete in itself, of a certain extension, presented and not narrated.

It is an imitation of people in conflict, with an emphasis more on their action than on themselves as characters. "The plot," states Aristotle, "is the first principle, and, as it were, the soul of a tragedy: character holds a second place."<sup>4</sup>

The Flies diverges from Aristotle's formalistic criteria in some structural points. According to the Poetics, the prologue was the first thing to appear, quite separate from the body of the play. Sartre provides his audience with an account of the facts that brought about the action through a line delivered by Zeus in a conversation with Orestes. This prologue would have been followed by the chorus in the classic tragedy, but this does not occur in Sartre's play. Here, there is no chorus at all. Even though the vox populi is heard in the rite celebrating the dead, it does not express the general opinion nor does it comment on the plot; it introduces the mood. One needs only to remember the Agnus Dei in the Catholic mass: "Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi: miserere nobis."<sup>5</sup> Other traditional components, such as melody, stasimon, episode, and exodus are also absent.<sup>6</sup>

Another requisite explicated by Aristotle concerns necessity and probability. Sartre's version of the myth of Orestes and Electra follows the rules of verisimilitude and necessity (or probability). Verisimilitude is fundamental,

the reason being that what is possible is credible: what has not happened we do not at once feel sure to be possible: but what has happened is manifestly possible: otherwise it would not have happened.<sup>7</sup>

Ananke, or the tragic necessity, accounts for the relationship between character and plot, which is so intimate as to determine, in R. J. Dorius's words, "the inevitability of the

series of events and of the particular challenge confronting the hero and the end to which he comes as part of his fate."<sup>8</sup> By rule either of necessity or of probability it is meant not only that a character should speak and act in a given way but also that an event should follow another by necessary or probable sequence.

In The Flies the tragic necessity is at work by force of the myth; nevertheless, Sartre's Orestes is driven not by fate, but by his free will. The classic tragic hero has a limited range of choice, once his fate is already determined by the Moirai. Clifford Leech explains that

Moirai, at least for the later Stoics, was only roughly equivalent to our 'fate': it meant rather the sum total of all things that have been, are, will be; it can be seen as independent of time, independent of the gods, through whom none the less mediated to men.<sup>9</sup>

The question of Moirai and free will is yet to be solved in tragic writing. Moirai appears as the commanding force of the universe — tragedy allows a minimal free will. Once a particular deed is performed, a chain of events is set off leading to disaster, out of human control.

The tragic hero's actions are motivated by religious, social, and familial precepts on one side, and his make-up on the other. Classic Orestes avenges Agamemnon out of filial duty; his will is neither wholly predetermined nor wholly free. Sartre's hero's range of choice is wider and presupposes a higher degree of awareness and acceptance of responsibility for his deeds omitted and committed. The way in which he responds to that which confronts him makes him more of an

existentialist than a tragic hero. Existentialism has been defined as

a chiefly 20th century philosophy that is centered upon the analysis of existence specif. of individual human beings, that regards human existence as not exhaustively describable or understandable in idealistic or scientific terms, and that stresses the freedom and responsibility of the individual, the irreducible uniqueness of an ethical or religious situation, and usu. the isolation and subjective experiences (as of anxiety, guilt, dread, anguish) of an individual therein.<sup>10</sup>

The key concepts that differentiate classic from modern Orestes are those of "freedom and responsibility of the individual," that is, the degree of participation in the process in which he is involved. These concepts can be found in the theories of Hegel, Scheler, and Falk, which, due to their mutually complementary aspects, will be applied simultaneously to the analysis of the development of Orestes's character.

Agammenon's son went to Argos to claim his kingdom through the killing of the usurper Aegistus and Clitemnestra, his collaborationist mother. But, at the same time, Orestes is trying to fill the void within him with "memories, hopes, and fears," as he has no referential upon which to build his identity.<sup>11</sup> Hegel and Scheler consider the tragic to be a conflict between equally justified powers that demand exclusive right. Up to a certain point, Orestes' conflict is that he is divided between the command of a god that forbade bloodshed and the claim for his father's throne, thus avenging Agammenon. These antagonistic drives are shown through the

character's hesitation as to staying in Argos or leaving the city. This hesitation is a characteristic of the tragic hero: he deviates from a straight line of conduct only to return completely reassured of his course of action.

Had Orestes chose one of these options, he might have been a tragic hero. Then there would have been the destruction of one of the values and his consequent defeat. But this does not happen. As the conflict reaches its climax, Orestes becomes aware that in committing himself to either course of action he would be a mere puppet in the hands of a whimsical Moirai. Thus, when he understands that there is another way to deal with the world, a reversal takes place and Orestes steps into the realm of existentialism. He refuses the conflict as he says that from that point on, he "will take no one's orders, neither man's nor god's."<sup>12</sup> Orestes recognizes that he is alone in the world, "as lonely as a leper," because of his freedom and his absence of remorse. Whereas in the Greek myth the term 'leprosy' was associated with punishment and damnation for not obeying Apollo's commands, in Sartre's rendering it bears the force of individuation: Orestes is forever marked because he chooses to exert the totality of his being.

It is opportune to point out that these simultaneous anagnorisis and peripeteia, that is, recognition and reversal, are a master stroke of Sartre in handling these structural components of the classic tragedy. Here is the turning point both for the plot and for the hero. Orestes' motivation now is different: he wants to assert himself as a free individual to restore a sense of dignity and integrity to the citizens of Argos. At this point, he must freely choose in loneliness and anguish that course of action which for him is the authentic life. This authenticity embodies the existentialist approach

to the universe: every individual ought to live up to the best that is in him. Orestes can only achieve this by eliminating Clitemnestra and Aegisthus. By contrast, Electra's motivation to kill them derives not from any commitment to an ethical value. She is driven by a bitter hatred, a personal vengeance which will add nothing to her status as a human being. While she was stirred by private and uncommitted pettiness, Orestes was moved by a sense of engagement. However, he does not intend to atone for the people but to wring the neck of their remorse.

He refuses the role of Agnus Dei — he is not a Christ figure who will sacrifice himself for the salvation of mankind and relieve man from the burden of the original sin. Whereas the idea of sin is characteristic of the Judaic and Christian traditions, it does not partake in the Greek religion. Sartre denies such burden by creating his Orestes free from any feeling of guilt. Orestes shrugs off the role of Redeemer and takes into his hands the lives of Clitemnestra and Aegisthus. The killing of the ruling couple sets him "beyond anguish and memories. Free. At one with himself."<sup>13</sup> The murder does not bring him any sorrow; rather it engenders his individuation, which is further explicitied by Orestes' voluntary exile and his taking the Flies with him.

Even though Orestes meets some of the requirements of the tragic hero, his degree of renunciation is not strong enough to grant him this stature. He ponders, "Who am I, and what have I to surrender? I'm a mere shadow of a man."<sup>14</sup> When he says his youth is gone, he is merely stating a fact and recognizing his commitment to freedom. In fact, he renounces nothing; far from that, he gains dignity, self-centeredness, and the satisfaction of having fulfilled his role.

A final point which denies Orestes the status of a tragic

hero is that he is not defeated. His 'crime' is his glory and his life's work. His "precious load," that is, freedom, endows him with an enormous strength, against which the gods and the Moirai are powerless. This deprives Sartre's version of the capacity of provoking pity and fear in the audience — catharsis is not achieved once the protagonist is not defeated nor does he yield his values.

The change in philosophical approach to tragedy, to use Leech's words,

was of major importance in modern thinking and served to give tragic writing a basis, no longer in a mere tradition where the term 'tragedy' had been so variously applied, but in conceptions of human life intimately associated with the consciousness of the time.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, when evaluated under these twentieth century theories of the tragic, Sartre's The Flies is much more of an exposition of the existentialist philosophy than of a modernly rendered tragedy. But this does not diminish the value of the play. On the contrary, human dignity was here enhanced as it had not been in any of the previous versions of the myth.



NOTES

<sup>1</sup> LEECH, Clifford. Tragedy. Manchester, Univ. of Manchester Press, 1969, p. 26.

<sup>2</sup> SARTRE, Jean Paul. The flies. In: GASSNER, John & DUKORE, Bernard S., ed. A treasury of the theater: from Henrik Ibsen to Robert Powell. 4. ed., New York, Simon and Schuster, 1970. v. 2, p. 1047-73.

<sup>3</sup> ARISTOTLE. Poetics. In: ADAMS, Hazard, ed. Critical theory since Plato. New York, Brace and Jovanovich, 1971. VI. 2.

<sup>4</sup> Id. *ibid.* VI. 14.

<sup>5</sup> HECKEISEN, Beda. Missal quotidiano. Salvador, Beneditina, 1961. p. 643.

<sup>6</sup> ARISTOTLE. *Op. cit.* XII seq.

<sup>7</sup> Id. *ibid.* IX. 6.

<sup>8</sup> DORIUS, R. J. Tragedy. In: PREMINGER, Alex, ed. Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics. Princeton, Princeton Univ. Press, 1974. p. 861.

<sup>9</sup> LEECH. *Op. cit.* p. 41.

<sup>10</sup> WEBSTER'S new collegiate dictionary. Springfield, Merriam, 1979.

<sup>11</sup> SARTRE. *Op. cit.* p. 1051.

12 *Id. ibid.* p. 1061.

13 *Id. ibid.* p. 1069.

14 *Id. ibid.* p. 1060.

15 LEECH. *Op. cit.* p. 22.