

## Influences of Greek Tragedy in William Faulkner's Short Stories

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**Abstract:** Greek tragedy's relationship with fiction is older than European prose or fiction. This relationship was manifested in motifs or plots of love, separation, ordeals and self-sacrifice. Ancient Greek plays have their protagonists as a person of importance and outstanding personal qualities, but fall to disaster. Moreover, Greek tragedy became a backdrop in modern fiction, specifically in adventure stories or romantic fiction, due to translations of early novels into other languages during the Early Modern and Enlightenment eras. This paper highlights the influences of Greek tragedy in William Faulkner's short stories.

**Key words:** Faulkner, Greek Tragedy, Southern Society, Hendiadys, Doubling

### **Introduction:**

The Impact of Ancient Greek Theater and Tragedy Ancient Greek culture has influenced modern culture in many ways from philosophy to medicine to government. Many old Greek concepts are used in technology, and even alphabetical system. Without ancient Greece, the modern world could not have advanced so far. A significant contribution of the ancient Greek

culture to the world today is the Greek theater, more specifically the structure of tragedy. Some contributions are the structure of tragedy in modern literature, rise of opera, and the creation of the theater. Greek drama originally started out as a ritual to honor the god of wine, Dionysus, by the cult of Dionysus. In the ritual, drunk men dressed up in goat-skin would sing and have dialogue in chorus to welcome the leader, the person acting as Dionysus (Sayre 151). In these revel-filled festivals, men dressed as satyrs, companions of Dionysus who are half-man and half-goat, while the women dressed up as maenads, the immortal followers of Dionysus. As the participants become drunk and filled with ecstasy, they “transform” into a different identity from before. Later on this behavior became the satyr play, a form of Greek drama. Tragedy is said to be originated from the Dionysian rites, where the name comes from tragoidos, which means the “goat song” from the satyrs – companions of Dionysus who are half-man and half-goat.

Ancient Greeks were serious about entertainment and used the theatre to investigate the world they lived in, and to be human. This theatre had the genres of satyr, comedy and tragedy of which importance was given to tragedy. Ancient Greek tragedy dealt with big themes like love, pride, loss, power abuse, and loaded relationships between men and gods. The protagonist would commit a crime and then slowly realizes the error. Examples of such tragedy are Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. The Greek gods may have been buried and chased from the realm of theology and their temples of worship may have become museums or libraries or frozen statues, but they are still alive in tragedies. Traces of Iliad and the Odyssey considered the origins of Western literature can also be found in fiction. Greek tragedians who took Homer’s characters and created plots of their can also be found in modern novels which integrate these myths into contemporary language.

As noted by critics, 19<sup>th</sup> century novelists were more interested in the tragedy's philosophical aspects. Their collective voice was reflected in Hardy's works, while Eliot, Thackeray, Hardy, and lesser known novelists were attracted towards the morality and metaphysical scope. Plots with shattered relationships and families offered exemplary narratives like Antigone's opposition or impact on progeny in Medea's desertion, or Clytemnestra's murdering of her husband after a long suffering resonated with modern social family concerns. Legal cases of Greek tragic plots prompted novelists to blend mythical epitome with contemporary news into a brand new fiction like *A Modern Instance* (Dean Howells -1881) and *Tess's Murder of Alec* (Hardy-1891). Ideas of inescapable destiny and inherited pollution appeared in novels transforming secular ideals imposed by social, economic, and psychological forces.

Modernist Tragedy is on collisions and conflicts of the inner character according to Hegel

*“Hero.....Greek classical tragedy.....confronted by circumstances.....after ..... identifying themselves ..... come into conflict with .....opposite..... justified ethical power” (Hegel 1975, 1226) [1]*

William Faulkner's is a master in exploring writing techniques when he compartmentalizes them. It is difficult and challenging to interpret his style when the characters expressions and ideas are retold within a pre-defined frame of the mind. The main truth revolves these characters not being attached to a specific place or time raising readers to greater values. He has been crowned as the American Shakespeare by some of his contemporary critics. It was not wrong. He was a captivating story teller and the people who influenced him were family, friends authors both predecessors and contemporary. The Bible and Greek tragedies too played an important role for his writing skills. His family and friends initially were instrumental to

spark the talent in him to write. His reading habit and his flair for story telling coupled with a vivid imagination blurring the line of reality and dreams, reflected in his writings.

### **Greek Tragedy in Short Stories of Faulkner**

Characteristic elements of Greek Tragedies can be found in the plot and characterization structures of Faulkner's novels. Though Faulkner did not follow Greek Tragedy patterns of unity, time, or action propounded by Aristotle, he was exceptional in raising it to a new level. The essential stages of Beginning, Middle, and End were followed meticulously by Faulkner in his plots and structure while he discarded the elements of chronology and time. His novels were also shaped by Metamorphosis and Mimesis (Minter, 1987). His plots achieved a mimetic effect, that of imitation. He equally influenced his readers on metaphysical conceits like John Donne while attaching importance to time based on conceits like "Water", "Shadow", and "Time". Faulkner was also adept in representing human living and working conditions recreated to his own settings and his dearly wishes.

Faulkner had made his short stories more shining and evergreen stories by using the element of Greek tragedy.

### **Mimesis (Art of Imitation)**

*"Mimesis basic theoretical principle in the creation of art. The word is Greek and means imitation though in the sense of "representation" .Thus an artist by skillfully selecting purposefully seems to imitate the action of life "(Mimesis, 2011)*

While describing the two Red Indians, Faulkner painted the two figures before our eyes. "They were both squat men, a little solid, burgher like; paunchy, with big heads, big broad, dust-colored faces of a certain blurred serenity, like carved heads on a ruined wall in Siam or Sumatra, looming out of a mist. The sun had done it, the violent sun, the violent shade their hair looked like sedge grass on burnt over lane"

Three basket and Louis Berry were entering into the clan of Red Indians, they were very strongmen their heads were big. In Siam and Sumatra the people who go for hunting make carved heads of the animals and hung it in the wall their heads are also like that sedge grass are grassed with triangular shape hence the hair of the Indians look as same as the sedge grass.

In the opening scene of “That evening Sun” Faulkner depicts the present city of Jefferson in the I Paragraph ..... He artistically portrayed scenes that while reading we can feel the city of Jefferson. “The streets are paved now, and the telephone and electric companies are cutting down more and more of the shade trees, the water oaks, the maples & locusts.....” (Collected stories)

As a progress or advancement of the town the trees are being cut down .The roads are well built telephone is there & electricity is there .The Negro woman come in vehicles to distribute the washed clothes to the city of Jefferson. This is a vivid description Faulkner paints for our reading pleasure.

### **Hamartia (Tragic or Fatal error)**

*Hamartia is the tragic flaw or error that reverses a protagonist's fortune from good to bad. Hamartia includes characters faces such as excessive ambition, greed or pride which result in tragic consequences. (Literary Terms, June 2015)*

In *Rose for Emily*, Emily's father due to his southern Pride and aristocracy thought that all the suitors of Emily are below their level and no one is equal to Emily. Emily is also very proud about her southern lineage. She didn't mingle with people and this lead to Emily's loneliness and death.

In the story *Elly*, the heroine Elly believing Paul as her right choice and her over confidence about Paul that he would marry her changed her as a murderer of two lives.

Wash Jones in the short story *Wash* believed on Sutpen than any other thing in this world leads to his down fall.

### “Hubris” (Art of self pride)

*Hubris describes a personality or quality of foolish pride or dangerous over confidence .Hubris often indicates a loss of contact with reality and over estimation of one’s own competence, accomplishments or capabilities. (Literary Devices, 201)*

Alec Gray in 'Victory' murdered the Sergeant Major .After that he received the citation and the title as colonel for his success he brings through the war .Because of his foolish pride he is not ready to continue his ancestral trade. He didn't want to resume his military career .At last Gray becomes a derelict due to his foolishness and pride.

### Nemesis (Retribution for Act of Hubris)

*Nemesis is a literary device that refers to a situation of poetic justice, where the good characters are rewarded for their virtues and the evil characters are punished for their vices. (Literary Devices, Nov 2014)*

Howard Rogers is a very calm and generous person. He didn't have anybody. He is the hero of the short story Honour. He didn't oppose his wife immoral activities. When she wants to go with Monaghan he didn't refuse her wish. He know that Buck Monaghan is intriguing in his conjugal life at that situation also he saved Monaghan life. When Monaghan realized his mistake and wants to lead a guilt free life he accepts it. Hence Howard's life is not destroyed by illusory romances.

### Peripeteia (Plot reversal)

*“Peripeteia is a sudden change in a story which results in a negative reversal of circumstances 'Peripeteia' is also known as the turning point, the place in which the tragic protagonist’s fortune change from good to bad. This literary device is meant to surprise the audience but is also meant to follow as a result of a character’s previous actions or mistakes”. (Literary Terms, 2015)*

Wilfred Midgleston the draughtsman of the story *Black Music* is working under Mr. Carter. He went to deliver the blue print of Mrs. Van Dyming theatre. On his way he experiences

hallucinations. In his confusion he throws away the portfolio and disappeared from the scene. Mrs Van Dyming seeing the portfolio without the draughts man wrongly spreads the news that Midgleston was a manic and the draughts man was murdered by Midgleston.

### **“Pathos” (Suffering)**

*Pathos is a quality of an experience in life or a work of art. That stirs up emotions of pity; sympathy and sorrow pathos can be expressed through pictures or even with gestures of the body. (Literary Devices, Nov 2014)*

As there is no guarantee of a peaceful life for Milly, Wash murdered Milly and her innocent child and then himself makes our heart ache.

Milly because of giving birth to a female child there is no respect for her from Sutpen. There is no body to take care of her.

“I want a sup of water” she said querulously “I been laying here wanting a sup of water a long time but don’t nobody care enough to pay me no mind” (Collected stories)

A lady after giving birth to a child must be given careful attention. She must be celebrated for giving birth to a child. But here nothing happens so it is a very pathetic situation even there is nobody to give her a cup of water. It filled our eyes with tears.

### **“Catharsis” (Transformation through Transaction)**

Catharsis is the release of emotions such as pity, sadness and fear through witnessing art. Catharsis involves the change of extreme emotion to lead to internal restoration and renewal (Literary Devices: 2017)

The two rivals in the short story “courtship” Ikkemotubbe and David are the male suitors of Herman Basket’s sister. They were fighting with each other to win the love of Herman Basket’s sister. They participate in some contest to win her as their wife. At last they realize that it is only a fancy and they become friends. Ikkemotubbe said “once how a woman’s fancy

is like a butterfly which hovering from flower to flower passes at the last “‘The Courtship’ - (collected stories) so they realized the situation and the fact that attraction towards woman is temporary. Hence they are freed from the high strung emotions at last and move on in life as friends.

***Anagnorisis (Tragic recognition of insight)***

***In a literary work, the startling discovery that produces a change from ignorance to knowledge. Revelation of the true identity of persons previously unknown (Anagnorisis, 2016)***

The poor old white Wash Jones in 'Wash' had a false impression about Sutpen. He imagined that Sutpen would be a savior and protector to him and his family. He thought that Sutpen was a very brave man with dignity. As Wash Jones had kept Sutpen in high esteem in his heart he had uttered the below lines

***“You were a brave man” ‘Wash’ - (Collected Stories: 541)***

***“Fine proud figure of the man” ‘Wash’-(Collected Stories: 542)***

Wash didn't give much importance to Sutpen's act of seducing his granddaughter. He expected a peaceful and protected life for his granddaughter.

But Sutpen didn't care about Wash Jones granddaughter Milly when she gave birth to a girl child. Sutpen also compares Wash Jones granddaughter to a horse and says that the horse is better than Milly because it gives birth to a colt (a male baby horse). The situation is reversed. Wash Jones is startled and surprised by Sutpen's comment.

***“He heard what Sutpen said and something seemed to stop dead in him before going on...” (Collected Stories: 544)***

It is explained crystal clearly in these lines that Sutpen's image of Wash here is juxtaposed in his heart earlier. The lofty image of Sutpen in Wash Jones heart is broken and shattered as depicted in the lines given below:

“But I never expected that Kernel! He cried aloud, catching himself at the sound of his own voice (Collected Stories: 545)

Therefore Faulkner has handled Anagnorisis beautifully in the story Wash through the character Wash Jones when the image of Sutpen rises to great heights and then dashes to the ground when Sutpen shows his true nature. Wash Jones hopes shatter.

### **Conclusion**

Tragedy as a form in modern drama works differently when compared to the ancient Greeks. The protagonist is usually an ordinary person or from middle class, while in Greek tragedy it was someone important and noble like a king or queen. Modern drama revolves around everyday problems such as social, economical, or personal conflicts. Greek Tragedies seem to be very linear and about the hero making a bad decision from the beginning of the play, which leads to his or her downfall in the end. Although, they were of higher ranking, ancient Greek's beliefs made the main character powerless to avoid their fate, which was controlled by the gods. As far as conventions go, Greek Tragedies are very unified. The tragedy of the royal protagonist will go through only one time span, a day or less, one setting, and one story. In a modern tragedy, however, the ordinary protagonist's story goes through multiple realistic settings and a realistic time line. Also, the story would contain multiple plots, which may contain flashbacks

Faulkner assessed conflicts and destructions during and after slavery in the Southern society through cultural inheritance and in his fiction's tragic formulations. In his attempt to confront Southern oppressive psychology, he took recourse to Shakespearean tragic models by involving themes of fratricide and incest from Hamlet, and race from Othello in a complicated method of expression. Shakespeare delivered linguistic situation historically in a situation where England was on its passage from feudalism to capitalism in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century.

Greek tragedy of the 15<sup>th</sup> century highlighted the difficult path in transforming an archaic society to the political ideals of a state, but for Faulkner, a new nation was attempting to come to terms with an unusual Institution. This made him alternate his thoughts on the glories of his cultural inheritance and its implication in a racially oppressed class in misery.

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