Realism and Fantasy in Salman Rushdie's Midnight's Children

*the structure of Midnight's Children is not merely a gimmick. The novel's form is inseparable from the theme. The novelist employs a particular manner of telling a story because he wants to show how stories are made, and that history too is a fiction, a story. We can experience why and how Rushdie uses the epic structure. We learn that Rushdie's errors are the unreliable narrator's. We also discover how magic and realism have been blended by the author, to merge the post-modern's faith with the oral narrator's "village" world view. Not only is Salman Rushdie a true child of Scheherazade's, just like her he will also go on telling stories to go on living one more day.*

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When Salman Rushdie first published Midnight's Children in 1981, no one could have imagined what a turning point it would prove to be for the Indian English Novel. A novel that one can say belongs to the genre of magic realism. Though the genre has been totally dominated by Latin American writers -Garcia Marquez, Juan Rulfo, Isabel Allende, and Laura Esquivel- the Indian author Rushdie holds his own.

The sheer energy, the innovations in the English language, form, theme and range of this big novel has stunning impact which surprised every reader across the world.

Today this novel is regarded as a trendsetter because of the influence it has had on the Indian English novels written ever since. Not only has it influenced novelists but it has also transformed the way fiction is being written in India now. It may be interesting to know that soon after Midnight's Children was published and it had been seen by some critics as very influential book which made every course on Indian writing in English has to include it. At the same time many scholars still doubted its lasting value. They felt it was like a shining meteor that had blazed across the sky and would in time, die. But that was disproved when Rushdie won the Booker of Booker's prize for Midnight's Children in 1994. Rushdie's exuberant humour, brilliant wit, imaginative boldness, enormous talent, prodigious powers of storytelling, all became part of the vocabulary of critics. It was not as if such praise was offered by reviewers in the West alone. Anita Desai, herself a leading Indian English novelist described the novel as being "of major interest to Indian readers," and went on to characterize it as a "great tour de force, a dazzling exhibition of the gifts of a new writer with courage, impressive strength, the power of both imagination and control, and sheer stylistic brilliance". (1)

The novel offers the reader from a feminist perspective and argues that Rushdie's attitudes are distinctly patriarchal. Kum Kum Sangari's "The Politics of the Possible," is a comparative analysis of Garcia Marquez and Rushdie which examines how Western readers classify the "magical realist" narratives (i.e., narratives that combine realism with fiction) of the two writers under the term of postmodernism and conveniently ignore the political activism in the works of these writers. Midnight's Children is that kind of work which can offer different meanings to different people all the time. Such is its universality.

Since the late 1960s, a major revolution has been underway to question the very way in which we perceive inherited ways of thinking about reality. It began in Paris in France with Ferdinand Saussure and Ronald Barthes and has since developed into a full fledged school of Post Structural criticism and intellectual thought. Its Influence has been felt in almost every area and discipline of study.

According to this school some ideas are actually formulated by society to preserve the position and power of society's politically, socially, economically dominant groups but these ideas are passed off as 'natural' or cultural in origin. In reality these ideologies have been created to justify the presence of inequalities so that the minority or marginalized sections may not challenge the dominance of the majority or the privileged groups.

Midnight's Children is classified in a category of fiction that goes by the name of magic realism. Magic realism, was born in Latin America and has followers all over the world. Today, whenever one thinks of magic realism, Salman Rushdie's name first comes to mind. Rushdie himself defines the term, in his essay on Gabriel Garcia Marquez. He describes it as a development out of Surrealism that "expresses a genuinely 'Third World' consciousness". (2) Rushdie's novels may equally be traced back to a home grown magic realism, as we will see as we move along. Yet there is a lot in common between societies that Naipaul has called "half made societies" (3), which nurture a particular brand of realism. What Rushdie says about Marquez's novel is true of Rushdie's Midnight's Children and the novels that follow: "in the world he [Marquez] describes, impossible things happen constantly, and quite plausibly, out in the open under the...
midday sun". The technique of magical realism finds liberal expression throughout the novel and is crucial to constructing the parallel to the country's history. Nicholas Stewart in his essay, "Magic realism in relation to the post-colonial and Midnight's Children," argues that the "narrative framework of Midnight's Children consists of a tale comprising his life story which Saleem Sinai recounts orally to his wife-to-be Padma. This self-referential narrative recalls indigenous Indian culture, particularly the similarly orally recounted Arabian Nights. The events in Rushdie's text also parallel the magical nature of the narratives recounted in Arabian Nights (consider the attempt to electrocute Saleem at the latrine (p.353), or his journey in the 'basket of invisibility' (p.383)."

Midnight's Children follows a technique that resembles Gabriel Garcia Marquez's style in One Hundred Years of Solitude. Many had speculated whether Rushdie was influenced by Marquez in the writing of his best known novel. But Rushdie claims to have come upon Marquez's fiction only after having sent Midnight's Children off for publication. Perhaps Rushdie came upon the same style following a different route, which we shall trace in a while. The first thing one notes about magic realist novels in the west is that they move away from the world we know as the real. They are set in an unreal world that might have nothing in common with the real world we inhabit. This genre is a reaction against 19th century realism. Different people at different times and places have debated on the place of real and unreal in art. In India, art has often involved an element of the magical and the fantastic.

Literary realism in the west began to have a value to be cherished in the 18th century. It coincided with the development of a rational and scientific outlook and resulted in the death of Romance. Realism reached a peak in the 19th century, particularly in the writing of fiction. Over the years, its birth in response to the particular socio-cultural conditions came to be forgotten and realism became the main criterion for judging the worth of fiction. Magic realists question the demand that fiction must always imitate reality. While acknowledging the value of 19th century realism, they wish to show that fiction can mimic forms of reality other than the empirical. In fact, they try to challenge our notion of the real and the unreal. In this, they are influenced to a large extent by new paradigms in science. The new paradigms in western science have turned the notions of the real and the unreal topsy turvy. This has set off a large scale crisis about the nature of reality in the western world. Fiction's turn away from reality reflects this crisis. Fiction becomes the form for investigating the nature of truth. It mocks at 19th century conventions to show that truth is always made up. Midnight's Children takes up each of the conventions for fiction writing and turns them inside out.

Though far from being a work immersed in social realism alone, Midnight Children contains a great deal of parody and satire of India-but all done with artistry. Given to paradox and the absurd, it is hard at times to tell the serious from the comic. And when we are in doubt we accept that the author means well and we read his humorous antics with goodwill. For those who are language-oriented, the novel owns a treasure of hyperbole, similes, and metaphors: as when he refers to "pickles of history." Pickles, for those who like them and eat them, leave a sour taste in your mouth, just like some episodes of Indian history.

To give us his own interpretation of reality, Rushdie tells us that "Sometimes legends make reality, and become more useful than the facts." And he goes on the insert a series of tales and legends within the novel.

Saleem, fabulous narrator, is an almost incredible character. No sooner has he told us a few verities than he quickly jars at us with exaggerations; no sooner he treats a fact than he contradicts it; no sooner he falls asleep than we see him acting in real life; no sooner he awakes than we know he's dreaming. And if that wasn't enough, the witch Parvati changes Saleem into an invisible being for some time. Ah! What a fine writer can do with language!

When Saleem says: "Midnight has many children; the offspring of independence were not all human. Violence, corruption, poverty, generals, chaos, greed, and pepper pots... I had to go into exile to learn that the children of midnight were more varied than I even I had dreamed."

Three points may catch our attention: the enumeration of abstractions is capped with one concrete noun-pepper pots. On the surface this is an innocuous juxtaposition, but on deeper scrutiny we can see that Saleem is appealing to our sense of taste and smell, for pepper can be pungent and explosive. Just as we chuckle at "pickles of history," we smile at Saleem's magical nose (or perhaps divine as in the elephant-headed lord Ganesh): "Using my nose (because although it has lost the powers which enabled it, so recently, to make history), it has acquired other compensatory gifts...." Next, we can only imagine how psychotic the other children could be to outdo Saleem. And next, we are confronted with the problem of chaos.

As readers, we are forced to keep track of time; a task that is easier said than done. Time in the novel is circular, fragmented, mythical, and cyclical-never linear. I cannot help thinking that all this is deliberate to simulate the chaotic societies that form the Indian nation.

Much of what was prophesied of Saleem symbol of India has come to pass: "Newspapers shall praise him, two mothers shall raise him. Bicyclists love him, but crowds will shove him! Washing will hide him- voices will guide him! Friends mutilate him- blood will betray him! Spitoons will brain him- doctors will drain him- jungle will claim him - wizards reclaim him! Soldiers will try him- tyrants will fry him. He will have sons without having sons. He will be old before he is old... And he will die.... before he is dead." With one exception: India will never die, for very much like China, India is a thriving force and the economic heart and pulse of the planet.

In the past, fantasy was often dismissed as being fit only for children. After centuries of oblivion, fantasy is suddenly centre stage in the Western world. Why? The new status of fantasy has to do with the present crisis about the nature of reality. The crisis is set off by new discoveries that show that reality cannot exist independent of the observer. The West, it looks like, is having second thoughts about the solidity of the factual universe it earlier swore by. What appeared to be facts are also shown to be stories. In the new thinking that goes by the name of constructivism, science is also proved to be a story.
Western writers called it a genre in which the protagonist displays a hesitation in the presence of the supernatural. They cited Alice in Wonderland as one of the best examples of fantasy and categorically left out tales like Arabian Nights because they did not display the mandatory hesitation in the presence of the marvellous. Instead, they took the marvellous for granted. What do we think of Midnight's Children? Does it take the marvellous for granted? We'll find the answer in the section describing magicians'ghetto and the seer's predictions about Saleem's birth to Amina Community.

Going back to what Rushdie said about García Márquez's One Hundred Years of Solitude can help us understand Rushdie's novel. In Márquez's novel, The Arrival of a Train is greeted with utter incredulity. Whereas the ascension of a character called Remedios the Beauty to Heaven is not. Rushdie named this the "village" world view. Now in Rushdie's novel one might have come across several characters who share this world view. He couldn't have missed the reference to Padma's response to the Reverend Mother's ability to enter her daughters' mind. When he speaks of "the fog of the guilt" hanging around his mother's head he is certain that "Padma would believe it, Padma would know what I mean."(158) We need a Padma to make the marvelous real. What is true according to Mary includes fortune tellers prophesying the birth of a two headed son, sadihus awaiting the arrival of the Blessed One, little girls speaking in the language of birds and cats. This does not necessarily have to correspond with truth written in an "Anglo-poised pool of light". One could dismiss these beliefs as the superstitutions of the illiterate. The problem comes when a Prime Minister is spotted soliciting the help of astrologers in drafting the country's first Five Year Plan, or when a young woman with a consciously secular upbringing succumbs to the prophecy of a Ramram Seth with the cobravallah, monkeyman, bone-setter surrounding him. Instead of hesitation, one finds a belief in the supernatural that cuts across class, caste and gender lines. As Saleem puts it, even a "literate person in this India of ours" is not "immune from the type of information I am in the process of unveiling".(Pg 158)

In the Western idea of fantasy, the supernatural is explained as a projection of human fears. Saleem insists that he is "not speaking metaphorically; what I have just written and (read aloud to stunned Padma) is nothing less than the literal; by the hairs of my mother's head truth".(Pg 200) Saleem might be a sceptic like his creator Rushdie, but this does not make him immune to the uncanny mysteries of the marvellous. Along with Rushdie, Saleem holds out for the "village" world over the urban like Marquez is alleged to have done. The difference lies in that where a Padma or Mary might swallow marvellous happenings without the slightest hesitation, Saleem might require justifying his position through philosophical argument. But the entire thrust of Saleem's arguments is to uphold and accentuate the existence of other perspectives on what is, which might violate secular notions of truth, "reality can have metaphorical content, that does not make it less real".(Pg 200)

Unlike the original tellers and listeners of tales like Arabian Nights, Rushdie cannot take the marvellous for granted. Saleem uses a technique replete with "matter of fact descriptions of the bizarre, and its reverse, "namely heightened, stylized versions of the everyday" to show a difference in "attitudes of mind"[(12) (218) - a technique and attitude that he confesses to have borrowed from Shiva his twin head's child. While he allows Padma and Mary to participate completely in the marvellous, Saleem Rushdie remains at a distance.

The use of fantasy by magic realists is as said earlier, intended to question the place of reality in art. Considering that three fourths of the world's literature does not satisfy the reality requirement of 19th century fiction, it can only be a period concept that needs to be discarded. Rushdie's magic realist mode is, by his own admission, a strategy to overcome the limitations of the historical testimony of a young boy's unreliable memory. But his strange, improbable and the mundane views can also be seen as an attempt to give us a glimpse into other aesthetics in which art does not need to imitate life. Oriental narrations grow out of a semi-mythical universe. Here the strange and the improbable are not only the natural subject matter of fiction but the bizarre and uncanny is also accepted as the 'real'. Miracles and improbabilities, of the kind Midnight's Children abounds with are accepted, at certain levels, without scepticism.

As a matter of fact the novel places the two perspectives side-by-side suggesting that it is not possible to translate one in terms of the other. This is different from fantasy where a delicate tension is maintained between a natural and supernatural explanation of events. Rushdie's solution is to juxtapose the two perspectives through Saleem and Padma to uphold the supernatural as an equally valid perspective even though some might not be able to access it.

It can be emphatically said that the structure of Midnight's Children is not merely a gimmick. The novel's form is inseparable from the theme. The novelist employs a particular manner of telling a story because he wants to show how stories are made, and that history too is a fiction, a story. We can experience why and how Rushdie uses the epic structure. We learn that Rushdie's errors are the unreliable narrator's. We also discover how magic and realism have been blended by the author, to merge the post-modern's faith with the oral narrator's "village" world view. Not only is Salman Rushdie a true child of Scheherazade's, just like her he will also go on telling stories to go on living one more day.

References:

i - Theme of Tragedy in Thomas Hardy's Novels

Thomas Hardy combines the elements of plot and the presence of a tragic hero to induce a cathartic experience at the end of the novel. The Mayor of Casterbridge exhibits many similarities with Sophocles' Oedipus the King in that each literary work recounts and dramatizes the rise and subsequent fall in fortune of the tragic hero through the operation of some innate character flaw. Although Thomas Hardy's novel is not a drama, it does satisfy many requirements for an Aristotelian tragedy. Thomas Hardy skilfully follows the classical design of a tragedy and, in doing so, his novel The Mayor of Casterbridge stands independently as an exceptional piece of nineteenth-century literature.

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Hardy's rural backdrop is neither romantic nor idealized. From the publication of his first novels Hardy's critics accused him of being overly pessimistic about humanity's place in the scheme of things. In 1901, Hardy expressed the notion that "non-rationality seems to be the guiding principle of the Universe." In all his fiction, chance is the incarnation of the blind forces controlling human destiny," as Lord David Cecil remarks in Hardy the Novelist, p. 24-30. Tragic vision is not one standard View of life common to all writers of tragedy from the Greek dramatists in the 5th century B.C. to the Victorian novelists of tragic prose narrators like George Eliot and Hardy. In the Greek tragedy, the vision largely relates to Gods because the Greek world view of the 5th century B.C. portrays man as a handiwork of Gods who not only govern the destiny of mortals but also directly intervene in their mortal affairs. In Sophocles the tragic vision may rely more on pre determined course of human life. It does lay emphasis on the chance happenings where man is shown committing errors out of sheer ignorance which ultimately lead to terrifying tragic ends. In Aeschylus, the tragic vision includes raising a finger at the Gods characterizing them as cruel whose handling of human destiny is more of a sport. The dramatist's vision is given crystallized expression in the following lines which are later repeated in Shakespeare's "King Lear"

"Like flies to wanton boys, are we to the gods: They kill us for their sport".

Thus the Greek tragic vision is centered on Gods and is less rooted in the character of the tragic hero.

When we come down to the post-enlightenment period especially of the Victorian age we find the tragedies emanating entirely from human errors because here is a world without Gods. No doubt, Hardy speaks of Gods in his novels but that does not express his belief in any supernatural power. His bitter references to such powers are any satirical expressions attacking the orthodox religious institutions which always reacted violently to Hardy's novels burning them publicly and blaming the author blasphemy. There is an of course undue emphasis of Hardy on the role of chance and human tragedy. However, the tragedies of innocent and good characters in Hardy are always brought about the evil deeds of his villainous characters.

Thomas Hardy's main concern in his novels is with the theme of tragedy. Hardy's vision of life is fundamentally tragic. In the world of Hardy's novels happiness is merely an "occasional episode". He never thought little choice in life. Every assertion of individuality, originality or even nobility and grandeur gets a rebuff from the impersonal orders that demands a fearful submission from man. That's why in his novels those characters who try to assert themselves are destroyed in their efforts and the rustics who are content within their limitations are happy. Hardy does not believe in a benevolent Christian God. In Tess of the D'Urbervilles he reverses Browning's blind faith in a loving God, when he makes Angel Clare think: "God's not in his heaven: all's wrong with the world!" Tees of the D'Urbervilles, p. 292). Hardy, in the beginning, believed in Christianity but as he grew up, he lost his faith in it. There were various factors which contributed to Hardy's loss of faith in a benevolent God. Hardy was brought up in an age when the new scientific discoveries changed the mental atmosphere and the age-old conceptions and conventions came to be questioned. Moreover, Hardy was by nature a very sensitive man who could not shut his eyes to the troubles of humanity around him. To him life seemed to be full of pain, suffering and disappointments, and this account for his preoccupation with the theme of suffering.

In this treatment of tragedy Hardy does not overlook the role played by man's character. For instance, Henchard acts in such a reckless manner that he himself initiates the process of his misfortunes. Tess also adds to her sad state of affairs by not acting in a prudent way. Her
passivity at crucial stages proves fatal for her. If she had boldly resisted her parents wish to go to Alec, she could have avoided her initial misfortune. Later on, her passivity comes in her way to disclose the real state of her affairs to Angel Clare.

In Hardy's novels an antagonistic fate wrecks the hopes and aspirations of various characters. Fate manifests itself in the form of chance or coincidence. Chance is nearly always mischance in Hardy's world. Though Henchard commits blunders yet all his misfortunes are not his own doings. He just initiates the process of his downfall which is completed by the web of unfavourable circumstances. The worst chance happenings in Henchard's life are the reappearance of the forlorn woman before him. This is mere a trick played by the fate on this man to ruin his prospects of happiness. In Tess of the D'Urbervilles, the heroine suffers most of the time because of this hostility of fate. If Angel Clare had come before Alec, there would have been no tragedy for Tess. If her letter to Angel Clare had not slipped under the carpet, her life would have been different.

In Hardy's vision of life man is of little significance in the scheme of the universe. Hardy thought man to be a mere toy in the hands of destiny which uses him for its, own sinister purposes. There are various causes of suffering in his novels and no single formula can cover all these. Moreover, the magnitude of these causes differs from novel to novel. The evil takes different shapes such as man's errors, social conventions, nature and fate.

The belief in hostile fate is an outstanding feature of Hardy's vision of life but as he grew old he thought that it is not only fate but the narrow mindedness of the society is also responsible for human miseries. In The Mayor of Casterbridge, this hostility of society is not as sharp as it is in Tess of the D'Urbervilles. In this novel Lucetta's death can be attributed, to the Orthodox conventions. In Tess of the D'Urbervilles, Tess's misfortunes are due to the narrow and double standards of morality of the society. Society punishes a woman for the same sin which a man is free to commit. Hardy has tried to show how inhuman the strict and hard Nature also plays an important part in Hardy's moral code of the Victorians can be. Tess has not acted against any law known to nature but only against the man made conventions for which she is severely punished. In 'The Mayor of Mayor of Casterbridge, the earthy, powerful but ignorant mayor declines into ruin while the alert modernist Farfrae prospers.

Many of Hardy's characters suffer throughout their lives which show that though they commit errors yet their suffering exceeds their faults. They are mere sinned against than sinning. They fight an endless battle against destiny and the odd circumstances. It is in their suffering that they are great and win our sympathy and admiration. By facing their evil fate stoically they are dignified. They rise to the tragic heights because of their superhuman courage which they show against all types of evil forces. Misery taught Henchard "nothing but a defiant endurance of it." Tess also fights against fate and society in a heroic manner. She is exceptional embodiment of feminine strength.

In Women and Sexuality in the Novels of Thomas Hardy, Rosemarie Morgan provides an interesting footnote to Hardy's handling of Nemesis in Tess:

Hardy's 'sadistic tale' does, of course, meet out punishment in equal measure: the fallen woman's true love is brought home from his 'Brazil' 'a mere yellow skeleton' condemned to live out his days with a 'spiritualized Tess' whom he may love but may not marry. (See 'The Deceased Wife's Sister Bill', which, after a lengthy passage through Parliament was finally passed in 1907 enabling the widowed partner to wed his sister-in-law. Angel could not, therefore, lawfully wed Tess's sister.) And her seducer suffers death by her own hand, which plunges into his body a killing blade divine retribution surely (Thomas Hardy Journal 5, 1: 54).

Hardy's subject is not 'men' but 'man'. He is not concerned with particulars but he tries to raise the tragedy of an individual to the universal level. By showing these characters suffering, Hardy wants to show as if the whole humanity is suffering. His characters become tragic figures in their fight against the powers over and above them. This apprehension of transcendent evil enables Hardy to view the problem of human pain and suffering in an eternal perspective. It is this perspective that makes his diagnosis of the human condition at once universal and important. Henchard, Tees all become the representative of whole humanity in their moments of trial. Social gatherings such as the opening bonfire in The Return of the Native (1878) and the planning of the Skimmington in The Mayor of Casterbridge, for example, suggest the choric scenes of Greek tragedy and more particularly of the commoners of Shakespearean drama. Like the great tragedies of fifth-century Athens and Elizabethan England, Hardy's Novels of Character and Environment convey a strong sense of fatalism, a view that in life human actions have been predetermined, either by the very nature of things, or by God, or by Fate. Hardy dramatized his conception of destiny in human affairs as the Imminent Will in his poetry, especially in his poetic drama of the Napoleonic wars, The Dynasts.

Normally Hardy's characters would seem victim of circumstances or condition beyond their control. But Hardy's protagonists achieve tragic status because they demonstrate moral stamina to struggle against the adverse conditions and also show capacity to undergo suffering with a stoic courage. Henchard and Tess struggle against opposing forces and never behave like a victim.

Complementing his minor roles as folklorist and anthropologist, Hardy was very much the social critic. In his fiction, not only natural forces (such as the adverse weather that assists in ruining Michael Henchard in The Mayor of Casterbridge ) but also human society seem bent on crushing the sensitive and imaginative individual. Society inflicts its gratuitous suffering through exercising worn conventions and superficial values, as well as through the new age's emphasis on efficiency. The "passionless permanence" of Egdon Heath in The Return of the Native and the Roman antiquities of The Mayor of Casterbridge contrast with futile and pitifully brief human existence.

Although the frequent iteration of sensational event, surprise, dramatic suspense, irony of circumstance, and reversal of fortune strain the probability of his novels, as he was well aware, Hardy took comfort in the realization that probability of character is far more important than probability of incident. "This accords with Hardy's last definition of tragedy: 'The best
tragedy highest tragedy, in short is that of the WORTHY encompassed by the INEVITABLE" (F. B. Pinion, A Hardy Companion: 145). In "Thomas Hardy's Tragic Hero," Ted R. Spivey argues against Baker's contention that Hardy's heroes are never quite tragic in the Aristotelian sense because they suffer not from a clearly-defined hamartia (an undermining flaw or fatal error in judgement) but from "paralysis of the will." Spivey contends that Hardy "was a writer of tragedies, a tragic poet, if you will, who did his work in prose" (Nineteenth-Century Fiction 9: 181) rather than in the traditional tragic medium, verse drama. In his great novels The Return of the Native, the Tragic Hero, Tess of the D'Urbervilles, and The Mayor of Casterbridge, Hardy saw man blown down by forces within and without himself and sought to record man's eternal struggle with fate. This is also what the Greeks and Shakespeare do. Conceding that Hardy's heroes lack the universality, the rich intellects and imaginations of Shakespeare's heroes, Spivey nevertheless sees in Tess and Jude "souls capable of great feeling, souls capable of exultation" and "nobility of passion" (182). He concludes that "Tragedy for Hardy is the defeat of the romantic hero's desire to reach a higher spiritual state. (188-9). His tragic heroes and heroines cry out defiantly against their fate, but accept their doom with an insight into and an awareness of the forces of evil which have effected their downfall: by the very strength of their passions Hardy's protagonists command our sympathies, "and we experience a feeling that someone of great worth has been lost when we see them destroyed" (183). Although we do not meet them on the stage, Hardy's heroes and heroines are specifically "tragic" in the Aristotelian sense because they elicit from the reader the requisite (and somewhat contradictory) responses of pity and fear.

Hardy incorporates many elements of the classical Aristotelian tragedy in his novel The Mayor of Casterbridge (1886). In an Aristotelian tragedy, the most important element is the experience of catharsis, the arousal of pity and fear in the audience. The effect of catharsis on the audience depends on the unity of the plot and the effective presence of a tragic hero. The plot in an Aristotelian tragedy consists of the reversal, the recognition and the final suffering. In the protagonist's following a pattern of decline and alienation, Thomas Hardy's The Mayor of Casterbridge is similar to the Greek tragedies, in particular Sophocles' Oedipus the King. Both literary works use three elements: catharsis, a complicated plot containing a secret, and the presence of a tragic hero to create the effect of tragedy. Hardy unites the events in The Mayor of Casterbridge with these elements to portray the "paradoxical rise and fall." Hardy follows the rise and fall of Michael Henchard, a poor itinerant agricultural worker who gains both fortune and respect upon becoming the mayor of Casterbridge. Unfortunately, the consequences of his past transgressions contribute to the tragic decline in Henchard's material, social and familial welfare. In The Mayor of Casterbridge, however, Hardy uses these three characteristics to create a modern Aristotelian tragedy played out in mid-nineteenth century England.

The protagonists in both Sophocles' Oedipus the King and Thomas Hardy's The Mayor of Casterbridge experience their final suffering following the reversal and the recognition scene. In an Aristotelian tragedy, the suffering of the protagonist is irreversible: Oedipus' self-blinding, prompted by Jocasta's suicide, cannot be reversed; he is bound forever to suffer in self-imposed darkness. Similarly, Henchard experiences a final suffering in The Mayor of Casterbridge. Henchard suffers through more than one death in the novel. Long before his physical death, Henchard dies in reputation and public esteem, no longer a man of wealth and power when his time as mayor ends. The moment of his final suffering, however, occurs after he experiences the loss of his step-daughter, Elizabeth-Jane.

According to Aristotle, a tragedy must contain the presence of a tragic hero: "a leader in his society who mistakenly brings about his own downfall because of some error in a judgement or innate flaw" (Banks ix). Both Oedipus of Thebes and Michael Henchard of Casterbridge satisfy many Aristotelian requirements of the tragic hero.

In The Mayor of Casterbridge, Hardy creates "the most valid and meaningful modern revival and adaptation" (Seymour-Smith 23) of an Aristotelian tragedy. Hardy combines the elements of plot and the presence of a tragic hero to induce a cathartic experience at the end of the novel. The Mayor of Casterbridge exhibits many similarities with Sophocles' Oedipus the King in that each literary work recounts and dramatizes the rise and subsequent fall in fortune of the tragic hero through the operation of some innate character flaw. Although Thomas Hardy's novel is not a drama, it does satisfy many requirements for an Aristotelian tragedy. Thomas Hardy skillfully follows the classical design of a tragedy and, in doing so, his novel The Mayor of Casterbridge stands independently as an exceptional piece of nineteenth-century literature.

References:

The Dramatic Vision and Techniques of Henrik Ibsen

Several of Ibsen's plays seem to suggest that he nonetheless believed in the possibility of realizing a, genuine human relationship within and despite the prevailing social aura. But while there are glimmers here and there of such hope, ... by.. and ..large, where true love seems about to be realized, it is only at the point of death. Solness, Hedda Gabler, Rubek, and Irene die at the very moment overpowering emotion tears these people from their self-preoccupation. Solness, we are told, is too frightened to mount a scaffold, but he clambers to the top of a new house the first time he feels truly and warmly human, and [falls] off.

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The dramatic vision of Ibsen is derived largely from his personal experiences. "Ibsen's work is basically linked with the circumstances of his life", writes Lavrin (Janko Lavrin: 1950). His work is closed interwoven with his own inner quest and with his personal crises and aspirations. Another critic, P.F.D. Tennant, points out that "Ibsen's family seems to for a background upon the pattern of which the situations of his plays are constructed" (Tennant: 1948). Thus, for a proper understanding of Ibsen's plays, it is absolutely necessary to have some knowledge about Ibsen as a man.

Henrik Johan Ibsen, was born on 20th March 1828, in a small shipping town, Skien, in Norway. He was the eldest of his four brothers and one sister. His father was a well to do businessman, and his early childhood was spent in splendor and gaiety. However, his father became bankrupt when Ibsen was only eight years old, nothing was left of their possession except a small farm. Ibsen remained here for seven or eight years in total obscurity. Ibsen's days at the farm passed in solitary musings, reading and drawing, for- sometime he attended a small private school in the town, but had to cut this short in: order to earn his living. He was only sixteen when he moved to Grimstind, a tiny town, to serve as an apprentice to an apothecary.

In 1889 when Ibsen was on a holiday in Gossensass, he met an eighteen- year-old Viennese girl named Emile Bardach. She fell in love with him, and he with her. He was at this time sixty-one years old. The girl wanted to go away with him, and he seems to have agreed to her proposal. But when he returned to Munich, Ibsen backed out of the plan. He was overcome by a sense of guilt at his infidelity to his wife who had throughout his life been his driving force and comfort. He was also overcome by a fear of scandal. He must also have experienced a serious doubt whether he could satisfy, or keep satisfied, a girl forty-three years his junior. However, he did not entirely give up his link with Emile. He kept writing warm letters to her for some time. The incident had a profound effect on his emotional life. For years he had been feeling that romantic love was not for him. Now at sixty-one he found that the impossible had happened. However, the affair led to nothing. In fact, several other young girls too had on various occasions fallen in love with him and he with them; but he did not have any serious affair with any of them. In sexual matters he seems to have been very hesitant and timid.

The year, after writing Hedda Gabler, Ibsen, now sixty-three, returned to Norway; and he spent the remaining fifteen years of his life there. Of the four final plays which he wrote, three deal with old men who have achieved fame in their respective professions though their emotional life has remained empty, and who are suddenly offered what they have avoided and yet longed for. Each of these three plays likewise depicts a marriage in which love has long been dead. It is obvious that in these three plays Ibsen is projecting his own experience of marriage and love. The fourth of these plays, Little Eyolf, is a different kind of play. It too deals with a dead marriage, but between younger people. This is sexually the most explosive of his plays, and technically perhaps his most amazing in the subtlety of its tangled relationships and the almost complete absence of outward action in the last two Acts.

It was only in- 1864, when Ibsen was thirty-six he tested success. His first. successful plays was The Pretenders and

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it brought hire at least the pension which he had been striving, to obtain unsuccessfully so long. His first realistic drama Love's comedy was published in 1862.

Ibsen's departure from Norway marks a new era both in his life and his work. Not only did the quality of his work change but his life also look a turn for the better. In fact, all his life and works fall into two dissimilar distance periods, the one proceeding and the other following the date. The earlier period was period of success and achievements. Ibsen discovered his true genius, only after he had left Norway. He went to Rome and was to spend the twenty; seven years in self imposed exile in Italy, Dresden, Munich before returning Norway. The last fifteen years of his life in Norway & Italy proved to be an inspiring influences. As H. Koht observes: “Life had to Wound his soul till it bled before his writing could proceed from bitter need, from an inner strife which demanded dramatic expressions.” (Koht: 1931)

The play Brand written in rhymed verse proved a huge success and for the first time in his life he made some money from what he had written. During the next twenty five years or, so. He wrote Twelve Great Prose Plays that made him immortal. He wrote twenty five plays, in the spring of 1906.

For his seventieth birthday in 1898 Ibsen received presents from a group of English admirers including G.B. Shaw, Thomas Hardy, J.M. Barrie, Gilbert Murray, and H.H. Asquith (the future Prime Minister of England). The Kings of Sweden and Denmark presented him with medals. In 1900 James Joyce, then an eighteen-year-old university student, published a review of Ibsen's last play, When We Dead Awaken. Joyce described Ibsen as possibly the greatest genius of modern times. James Joyce and Thomas Mann were among those who studied Norwegian in order to be able to read Ibsen's plays in his original language.

After completing When We Dead Awaken, or perhaps while working on it, Ibsen had the first of several paralytic strokes which were to incapacitate him, and he spent the last five years of his life virtually paralysed and unable to write. He died on 23rd May 1906 at the age of seventy-eight.

In a letter to Peter Hensen, ibsen writes: “But what you really want is the inner history, of course. Here it is:

Everything I have produced as a poet had its origins in a state of mind and a real life situation. I have never written anything simply because - as they say - I had 'found a good subject'. Now I shall confess chronologically.

Catiline was written in a little provincial town where I was not in a position to give vent to everything that was fermenting in me, except by playing mad practical jokes that drew upon me the wrath of all the respectable citizens who were completely remote from that world which preoccupied me in my isolation.

Lady Iger derives from a hastily begun and violently terminated infatuation, to which also a number of poems refer...

The Vikings at Helgel and I wrote while I was engaged. For 'Hjordis' I used the same model as for 'Svanhild' in Love's Comedy.

While I was writing Brand I had standing on my desk an empty beer glass with a scorpion in it. From time to time the creature became sickly; then I used to throw a piece of soft fruit to it, which it would then furiously attack and empty its poison into; then it grew w again. Is there not something similar to that about us poets? The la of nature are also valid in the world of the spirit.

After Brand, Peer Gynt followed as it were of its own accord. It written in Southern Italy, on Ischia and in Sorrento. One becomes reckless when one is so far away from one's future readers. That we contains much that is relevant to my own youth; for Aase my mother served as model, with necessary exaggerations. (And also Inga in The Pretenders.)

The locale has a great influence on the forms within which imagination creates ... is there not in The League of Youth something reminiscent of 'Knackwurst' and beer? I do not want to depreciate the play by this; but I do think that the point of view has change because here [in Germany] I find myself in a society well ordered the point of boredom.”(28th Oct. 1870)

Several of Ibsen's plays seem to suggest that he nonetheless believed in the possibility of realizing a, genuine human relationship within and despite the prevailing social aura. But while there are glimmers here and there of such hope,... by... and...large, where true love seems about to be realized, it is only at the point of death. Solness, Hedda Gabler, Rubek, and Irene die at the very moment overpowering emotion tears these people from their self-preoccupation. Solness, we are told, is too frightened to mount a scaffold, but he clambers to the top of a new house the first time he feels truly and warmly human, and [falls] off. Accustomed to a soft life, Rubek climbs the most forbidding mountains when he meets the mate who stands beyond all conventional conceptions of life, whereupon an avalanche buries them both. Hedda Gabler, tied down by a mediocre marriage, exults in the suicide of her friend as an expression of freedom and the beauty of life, and she confesses that she feels alive for the first time just before she shoots herself. Death climaxes the will to life of all these people. It stands in somber contrast to the complacent self-confidence of Moliere, for whom suicide was absurd and ridiculous. The disparity between Moliere's and Ibsen's resolutions illustrates the decline of the curve of middle-class optimism.

Ibsen's concept of 'Drama of ideas' is largely seems to be based upon his ability to see and visualise the things. He could, obviously, see how the untruthful conventions are being treated as the pillars of society. P.E.D. Tennant has very aptly pointed out:

“Firstly there is Ibsen's outstanding quality of vision. He himself said that 'to be a poet is to see'. He was no mean painter and he certainly had the faculty of visualizing all he wrote. When writing he was sometimes under the influence of hallucination, and was unable to distinguish between
reality and the creatures of his imagination. While working on A Doll's House he was nervous and retiring and lived in a world alone, which gradually became peopled with his own imaginary creatures. Once he suddenly remarked to his wife: 'Now I have seen ora. She came right up to me and put her hand on my shoulder'. 'How was she dressed?' asked his wife. She had on a simple blue cotton dress, he replied without hesitation. Besides visualizing them he also grew intimate with his characters while creating them, and when he sent his manuscript of The Wild Duck to Hegel he wrote: 'I am sending you the MS of my new play, The Wild Duck, which has occupied me daily for the last four months, and from which I can not part without a certain feeling of regret. The people in this play, in aspite of their numerous weaknesses, have none the less after continuous daily intercourse become dear to me ...' So intimate had Ibsen become with Norath while at work on A Doll's House that when John Paulsen asked him why was called Nora, Ibsen replied in a matter-of-fact tone: 'she was really called Leonora, you know, but everyone called her Nora, since she was the spoilt child of the family.' This intimacy was of course for his characters. Laura Kieler, whose domestic troubles he exploited for A Doll's House, continually reproached him for his breach of confidence, and it is significant that the dress she wore on the occasion of her last visit to Ibsen just before he wrote When We Dead Awaken is described exactly in the black and white robe which Irene wears in the play. " (1948:243-4)

Ibsen's vision was thus realistic based upon real happening he noticed around. In case of Nora he has personally seen the domestic troubles of the lady and exploited the incident for his play. The plays which he wrote after 1857 do clearly attest to the fact that Ibsen lived in his times. The League of Youth written in Germany in 1869 was to become his most popular play. It marked Ibsen's transition from the broad canvases of his poetic drama to modern realism. It is a tropical play.

Ibsen's real talent lies in the skill with which he invests the ordinary subjects with extraordinary meanings. We may or may not agree with Luigi Pirandello who placed him next to Shakespeare, but there is no doubt that he is one of the greatest dramatists the world has ever produced.

References:
(2) Tennant P. F. D., Ibsen's Dramatic Technique Cambridge, 1948.
(4) Ibsen letter to Peter Hensen 28th Oct. 1870.