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Loneliness and the Tragic Hero in Shakespeare's Works

*We are born alone, we live alone, we die alone;
only through our love and friendship can we create
the illusion for the moment that we are not alone.*

(Orson Wells)

Solitude is the profoundest fact of the human condition; it is the state of being alone in solitary isolation or in another definition, it is that feeling of sadness that results from being abandoned or forsaken, a disposition toward being lonely. Man is the only being who knows he is alone. Even from the beginning of his work, Shakespeare had a dominant feeling of the tragic, as a consequence of a vision of Man's fall from the horizon of the sacred and into history, vision that left behind a powerful state of dissolution and estrangement. That is why Shakespeare was able to create in his works some of the most spectacular tragic heroes who fully develop this character trait. It is very interesting to see and analyse the depth and the measure of their isolation, the mechanism of their intricate psyche, under the pressure and the tensions of the oppressing society they are part of. Such characters are prone to develop an inner discourse, which becomes their dialogue with themselves or with the unknown audience that seems to share thus their tragic state and are given, therefore, the possibility of purification through catharsis.

During the Renaissance, solitariness represented a statement of individualism, a sense of self-love far greater than the love one might feel for the other, it is in fact a proof of the attempt at detaching from the unbecoming crowd and unveiling the feeling of individual superiority. One of the great individualists of the Shakespearian world is Richard III:

*"What do I fear? Myself? There's none else by: / Richard loves Richard;
that is I am I. / Is there a murderer here? No; -- yes, I am: / Then fly. What,*

Loneliness and the Tragic Hero in Shakespeare's Works

from myself? Great reason why: / Lest I revenge. What, myself upon myself? / Alack, I love myself. Wherefore? For any good / That I myself have done unto myself? / O, no! alas, I rather hate myself / For hateful deeds committed by myself! / I am a villain: yet I lie, I am not. / Fool, of thyself speak well: -- fool, do not flatter. / My conscience hath a thousand tongues, / And every tongue brings in a several tale, / And every tale condemns me for a villain." Therefore, in the world created by Shakespeare, individualism is a sign of villainy, a certain corruption of the human soul by power and materialism.

The tragic hero, however, shows neither an unthinking, nor a stoical retreat; they recognize and endure the agony of their pain, being fully aware of their vulnerability. More than that, the tragic hero is a well-conceived and highly individualized character. He is endowed with the power of expression, which is equal to his power to endure and prevail, hence the protagonist's solitude.

Night time is the period when sleeplessness, brooding restlessness and tense anticipation of what is to come, culminate in some of the most intense manifestations of solitary characters – soliloquies are at night time developed and further expanded. The character's thoughts begin to take a shape at night time. We are always prepared for the character's solitude through the background, a special kind of scenery or through words that make the necessity or the wish for solitude explicit.

It is not by chance therefore, that Hamlet and Macbeth speak the most significant soliloquies in the tragedies. Their inner loneliness is combined with the compulsion to conceal their thoughts from those around them. Much the same can be said about Brutus and Lear. In the development of the soliloquies, such lonely characters never separate the inner vision from the events of the outer, living world; abstract postulations are always related to the concrete present reality of the play.

They address fictitiously an imaginary partner of conversation; his ego, his own heart or heavenly and earthly powers, people absent or sometimes even those present (but out of earshot), or he may address personifications, often moon and stars, real or imaginary objects (such as the dagger in *Macbeth*). They impart more of their true being in soliloquy than in dialogue and they provoke a

response that oscillates between sympathy, withdrawal and doubt. The audience is made to feel that they are being taken into the speaker's confidence.

Solitude can either be a character trait or is the consequence of the character's deeds within a certain train of events. A character may use madness as a shield of protection as a defence of his inner freedom. Hamlet, for instance, chooses to protect himself by using a cocoon of alleged madness. In his world, there is no room for love. Hamlet loves Ophelia, but he knows that he is being watched and love gradually fades away: Prince Hamlet says he loves her – and perhaps he does love her – but Ophelia must remember that a prince is not like ordinary men who are free to choose wives for themselves. Moreover, Hamlet is not only isolated by his social status but also by his reflexive character. According to the Italian Renaissance philosopher Matteo Palmieri (1406-1475) „He who loves solitude can be neither just, nor strong, nor experienced in those things that are of importance in government and the affairs of the majority.” Princes such as Hamlet and Machiavelli's „principe” are individualists and play the role of tragic heroes. As a tragic hero, Hamlet is destroyed because of a major weakness; his flaw is irresolution – the uncertainty on how to act or proceed. Because of his uncertainty, Hamlet is seen unable to act and thus tends to generalize over subjects such as death, life, love, social status. He declares “*conscience does make cowards of us all*” and that the ruddy nature of one's intent, or resolution upon an action is “*sicklied*” over with the “*pale cast of thought*.” This makes an individual second-guess his own actions and often times take no further action at all, to his own irresolution.

The play abounds mostly in reflections on human life. Hamlet sparks an internal philosophical debate on the advantages and disadvantages of existence. He uses the pronouns “*we*” and “*us*”, the indefinite “*who*”, the impersonal infinitive, he speaks explicitly “*of us all*” and of “*what flesh is heir to*”, of what “*we*” suffer at the hands of “*time*” or “*fortune*”. However, we realize that he is not of the same nature as the other personae of the play. His loneliness and his disillusionment set him apart from the others, making him an outsider, an outcast. Furthermore, estrangement is but a trial, a detachment from the ordinary matrix, from society, a separation from a substance which has become poisonous, as Coriolanus evokes: “*I'll never / Be such a gosling to obey instinct;*

but stand,/ As if a man were author of himself,/ And knew no kin." (V.III.43-47). Lonely characters are in a continuous search for unity with the Self. They condemn themselves to solitude hoping to encounter within themselves, in isolation, the answers to the problems that exclude them from within a chaotic society.

For Hamlet and heroes such as him, loneliness represents fulfilment, even if on another level.¹ And from this point of view, Hamlet's loneliness appears more like the one of the later Goethe's romantic hero. His ruling passion is to think not to act in a world where people impose their will on others. He is full of weakness and melancholy and there is no harshness in his nature.

Madness allows Hamlet to say things that a sane man would not be permitted to say and this fact distances him from other people, who, if they could get closer, might be able to discern his real motives. Consequently, Hamlet lives out of himself, in a world of imagination, just as Romeo does in a world of love. Both are absent and self involved and this is a main source of their inner seclusion.

On the other hand, there are various shades of loneliness and Shakespeare seems to master the most of them very well. In his *Othello*, loneliness acquires yet another meaning. This time it is not the loneliness of an outcast because of his different perspective on life and its events, but, on the contrary, loneliness is now imposed through skin colour and jealousy. It has been said that *Othello* is "*the tragedy of a man under an empty heaven*"². Othello too, becomes an outcast not because of external events, but because of his own tragic flaw, which is his obsession with Desdemona's treason. Although he does not think of himself as a lonely person, as he considers Yago his truthful friend, he does not seem to belong to our world and he seems to enter it almost from wonderland. He is mysterious, leads a charming life and becomes a hero. Furthermore, his physical appearance adds to his estrangement – he is a moor, he is different from the others: "*an extravagant and wheeling stranger/ Of here and everywhere.*" (I, I, 136-7). "He is great, he is dignified, he is majestic, he

¹ Mihaescu Florin, *Shakespeare si tragiunile insingurarii*, Editura Rosmarin, Bucuresti, 2001, p. 3;

² Jan Kott, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, Methuen & Co. Ltd., London, 1967, p. 78;

soars above all heads, he has an escort bravery: battle, the braying of trumpets, the banner of war, renown glory [...] but he is black.”³ Othello is a very isolated figure because of his colour, which makes him almost unique in Venice. More than that, his race makes him different from the others as he was not born into the ways of Venice. He has lived all his life as a soldier, and so his lack of knowledge, of how the world works further isolates him from those he meets. This isolation leaves him more open than would otherwise be the case to the words of Yago – one of the few people he feels he can trust and who branches his isolation – and more willing to believe that a Venetian lady would behave as he is told Desdemona has.

Consequently, loneliness can be caused by external deeds (*Othello*), which have a strong effect on the inner being, but it can also be caused by the internal thoughts and suppositions we make for ourselves (*Hamlet*). However, there is another kind of loneliness, caused by murder and the lust for power, which leads to unexpected turns in one's nature. Such is the case of *Macbeth*. In *Macbeth* everyone is steeped in blood. It is here that the process of evidencing loneliness as villainy is complete. There is a struggle with uneasy sleep. The world is tight and there seems to be no escape. Even nature is impenetrable and close, consisting of mud and phantoms. This environment seems to force the individual to self-exile. It is in these circumstances that the character makes direct contact with his guilty conscience. More often than not, the result is madness.

Perhaps the most marvellous moment in *Macbeth* is when the two actors – Macbeth himself and his wife – suddenly emerge from their madness, and look upon their deed – Duncan's murder – with naivety. Here again, as in *Hamlet*, though in a totally different fashion, the discrepancy between the character and the act is obvious and it becomes part of a troubled conscience. Macbeth does not refer to his action by its name, but rather by a euphemistic term – “deed”. After the murder a total change in the character's nature takes place. Consequently, Macbeth's particular hell is one that will move the protagonist into a world of isolation, loneliness and despondency.

³ *apud* Susan Zimmerman, *The Wheel of Fire, The Othello Music*, by G. Wilson Knight, London, 1959;

The struggle for power is one of man's greatest tragic flaws and therefore one of the strongest tragic intensifiers. Power corrupts and therefore does it in an absolute manner. According to Jan Kott, each of the great historical tragedies begins with a struggle for the throne or for its consolidation. Each ends with the monarch's death and a new coronation. In each of the Histories, the ruler drags behind him a long chain of crimes. He rejects the feudal lords who helped him to reach for the crown, he murders, first, his enemies and then his allies; he executes possible successors and pretenders to the crown. However, he is not able to execute them all because a young banished prince returns to defend the violated law – the king is God's sent on earth, but is not God himself. The rejected lords gather around him as he personifies the hope for a new order and justice. Nonetheless, every step towards power continues to be marked by murder, violence and treachery. Thus, when the new prince finds himself near the throne, he drags behind him a similar chain of crimes, as those of the until now legitimate ruler. So, when he assumes the crown he will be just as hated as his predecessor⁴.

The king is not isolated only through his status as monarch, but also through the chain of events that preceded his access to the throne. Moreover, friends and enemies become one and the same at a certain point, when the urge for power is grater than the individual's need for mutual understanding and affection. Their solitariness is not only of space but also of time and mind, encumbering villainy. The king becomes a tool of his own power-devouring self, which enters a process of complete dehumanisation. They value themselves more than the others behaving in such a way and developing such a set of principles that they come to value the individual from within more, or to value the self in opposition to society. Therefore, the monarch, as a tragic hero, becomes a completely estranged person who is eventually killed by his own lust for absolute power. Henry VI asserted his solitude in what seems to be a synthesis of this human state: *"I have no brother, I am like no brother / And this word love`, which greybirds call divine,/ Be resident in men like one another, / And not in me: I am myself alone."* (Henry VI, (III), 5.6.79-83). Thus, solitude is also a consequence of the fight for power that tears apart, shatters, isolates and

⁴ Jan Kott, *idem*, p. 103;

Loneliness and the Tragic Hero in Shakespeare's Works

banishes from society but also of a lack of love, that generally makes one closer to life and gives a meaning to existence, a love that is refused by fate. They only remain with the lucidity of the tragic moment, that lucidity which considerably enhances their loneliness⁵.

However, an analysis of characters such as Macbeth, Hamlet or Othello could never exhaust the potential of a subject such as the concept of loneliness in Shakespeare's work. More than that, one may easily take into consideration a different approach of this theme. If we perceive loneliness as a certain withdrawal from the middle of the „crowd”, a process of implicit isolation in view of reuniting with the self, of reassembling the essence of the soul and defining the true being, Hamlet is the perfect embodiment of this state. But, if we have in mind that loneliness is an exile from society to please „the demon”, the vice, then Macbeth is one of the most lonesome characters in Shakespeare's world.

On the other hand, if we approach the issue psychologically, solitariness may find its perfect correspondent in none other than Ophelia's character. Although Ophelia's role is a subsidiary one, she becomes a symbol of the human love to which Hamlet turns for support, and her rejection of him emphasizes symbolically that Man faced with Hamlet's task must rely upon himself alone. Ophelia's madness is related to the central theme of the play, for Ophelia parallels Hamlet in that she must learn to live with evil in a world in which her lover may go mad and murder her father and in which there is no soul to whom she can turn for aid in her abandonment⁶. Some might argue that, considering this point of view, the protagonists of the great tragedies could not be interpreted or thought of as lonely characters because they are driven by some kind of high ideal or vice and they do not feel the need to be accepted within a certain society. Ophelia is deprived of her love and even her life, feeling treason to the utmost as she is robbed of Hamlet's love being left to steep further in her madness towards suicide. Ophelia is protected by her father from the terrible events that surround her, but his protection fails as the evil around her will eventually prevail over her unstable psyche: *Read on this book,/ That show of such an exercise may colour/ Your loneliness* (3. 1. 47-49).

⁵ Mihaescu Florin, *Shakespeare si tragediile insingurarii*, Editura Rosmarin, Bucuresti, 2001, p. 3;

⁶ Irving Ribner, *Patterns in Shakespearian Tragedy*, T&A Constable Ltd., Great Britain, Edinburgh, 1971, p. 88;

Her loneliness and her madness altogether could be easily explained through Lacan's theory on loneliness: "as long as you derive your identity from the world around you, you have to be concerned about losing it. Like a dragon sitting greedily on its hoard of treasure, your entire being will be caught up in defending what you are most afraid to lose". She loves Hamlet so much that she eventually identifies herself with him and when her love is betrayed she may have had the feeling of losing her identity. "You cannot be honest with others because if you speak your mind you might offend someone, and then he or she will turn away, taking your identity in the process, leaving you empty and "dead." That's what loneliness is: it's a fear of psychological death"⁷, according to Lacan.

The protagonists' solitude may also be interpreted as the author's solitude, an author who withdrew from his enigmatic life of playwright, spectator and actor four years before his end, estranging himself in death, to be recovered in another life. In conclusion, we can say that the fate of the hero, in a world which no longer accepts him on account of the fact that it is incapable of understanding his essence, is that of the permanent wanderer, if not sacrificed or martyr. He becomes thus a perpetual exiled being who hides his detachment under a mask of loneliness.

⁷ *apud* Raymond Lloyd Richmond Jacques, *The mirror stage* by Jacques Lacan, trans. Alan Sheridan, W. W. Norton Publishing House, New York, 1977.

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