



## INVERSION: EMERGING PERSPECTIVES IN HUMAN EXPERIENCE AND LITERATURE

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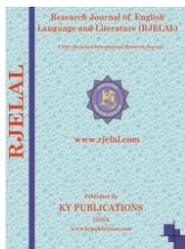
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### ABSTRACT

Human experiences provide content and perspectives to works of literature. Tragedy and comedy are commonly known as two major categories of human experiences and they have been carried over into works of literature under these terms, particularly as provided by Aristotle, and with tragicomedy given a secondary position. However, as provided by means of a critical approach, this essay shows that this tradition misses one other major category of human experiences which should have also been carried over into literature and this gap has been inadvertently sustained over the centuries. This other category is what this foundational work both establishes and explores as 'inversion', which refers to the cumulative result of a series of human actions and circumstantial events occurring in real life or in literary plots which leave the public or audience firmly convinced a particular individual or a main character has ended on a tragic note or as a loser whereas deep within his or her heart and for some strong reasons, and probably known only to a few, he or she is equally convinced he or she ended on a note of comedy or as a winner. Alternatively, 'inversion' could be that while the public or audience is convinced everything ended on a note of comedy or victory, the individual or main character is convinced it all ended on a note of tragedy or defeat. Inversion is also distinguishable from tragicomedy. Thus, exploration of inversion in literary works henceforth will be important for the future of literature.

**Keywords:** Aristotle, comedy, human experiences, literary theory, inversion, tragedy.

### Introduction

The connection between social criticism, literature and life in society cannot be denied even under critical pressure from literary theories like Formalism, structuralism, post-structuralism and New Criticism that largely consider literature a world of its own. Branches of philosophy that explore human existence and social dynamics from different angles agree with the view that human

experiences are a rich source of perspectives for philosophy and literature and this is underscored by theoretical frameworks that make use of both philosophy and the structures of literary theory such as Marxism, feminism, postcolonialism, New Historicism and Queer theory.

People were experiencing tragedy and comedy in their lives long before ancient Greek thinkers like Homer, Epicharmus, and Aristotle as

well as important playwrights of Classical Greece namely, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, and Aristophanes turned these two categories of human experiences into conceptual frameworks for literary art. Their creative writings are evidence of dialectical interpenetration between philosophy and literature in the art of social criticism. In this regard, their ingenuity lies not in actually inventing something new but in creatively borrowing from lived experiences into literary art.

This understanding holds even as Aristotle points out in Part III of his *Poetics* (c. 335 BCE) that Dorians claim to have invented tragedy and comedy whereas Megarians lay claim to comedy. Such claims in ancient Greece do not refer to inventing something new in human experience but for bringing tragedy and comedy to the fore of literary discourse. In addition, ancient Egypt is credited with earliest theatres dating back to around 2800 BCE particularly in connection with mythologies and ceremonies associated with the triad of Osiris, Isis and Horus. On the contrary, ancient Greek theatres date back to around 700 BCE particularly in connection with the cult of Dionysus which featured dramatic performances of tragedies, with comedies included from 487 BCE while Greek plays of the classical era emerged between the fifth and fourth centuries BCE. In ancient Greece, two muses were accepted for drama, namely, *Melpomene* (the weeping face) for tragedy and *Thalia* (the laughing face) for comedy while tragicomedy is still considered inferior by many critics.

*Poetics*, the earliest extant work of dramatic theory, which calls poems 'representing action' (*mimesis* or imitation) 'drama', also provides grounds for the broad description of literature as representation of human action. John Dryden goes on to expand this view to become the representation of human nature and actions when he says 'a play ought to be a just and lively image of human nature, reproducing the passions and humours, and the changes of fortune to which it is subject, for the delight and instruction of mankind' (cited in Nwabueze, 2011:17).

Aristotle provides in *Poetics* a classification and analysis of types and characteristics of poetry

with respect to medium, object and manner (mode) of representation and lists major categories as epic poetry, tragedy, comedy, dithyrambic poetry and music (from flute and lyre). While his areas of interest according to ranking are tragedy, epic poetry and comedy, he describes tragedy (which he explores at great length) and comedy as two major categories of drama. On the contrary, earliest recorded use of the word 'tragicomedy' can be found in Plautus' prologue to his play, *Amphitryon*, where Mercury wittingly suggests that the play should be called *tragicomoedia* because of the indecorum of including slaves alongside a cast of kings and gods.

However, a close look at the spectrum of human experiences will show that tragedy and comedy are by no means the only major categories of human experiences and literature and that by zeroing in on just these two, Aristotle and critics in his tradition have missed another major category which here will be called 'inversion'.

#### Understanding Inversion

Inversion is that category of human experiences where the result of a series of human actions and circumstantial events is a situation where the public or an audience is firmly convinced a certain individual in society or a character in a plot is a loser, a tragic hero or tragic heroine whereas for some strong personal reasons known probably to just a few close associates, this individual or character is equally convinced he or she is rather a winner or a comedic hero or heroine. These inverted circumstances also hold true in a situation where the public or an audience is firmly convinced everything has finally ended on a winning note or as comedy whereas it deeply feels like defeat or tragedy to the person of interest.

For these inverted circumstances to be achieved, the sequence of actions and events directly producing a sense of tragedy must unfold along a route or at a level different from that directly producing a sense of comedy even as both must occasionally interact and be flush with each other as a unit by means of the individual or character in question. It then devolves on a writer

of inversion to keep these two diametric levels synchronised as a unit rather than split.

Quite clearly, inversion, as here explained, is neither covered by the traditional binary of tragedy and comedy nor is it less a major category of human experiences providing relevant and necessary resources for literature.

The diametric state of affairs in inversion should naturally or logically trigger philosophical or existential questions which will be seen to overwhelm the inverse hero or heroine since these questions will provide access to the hero's or heroine's inner struggles and assessments of reality. Examples include: 'Why have things turned out like this for me despite how hard I fought?' 'How has he/she become so unlucky that unforeseen circumstances could impose such on him/her?' 'Is life this cruel and meaningless?' 'Who am I?' 'Why does something like this keep occurring in my life like a pattern?' 'Is it just Satan messing with him/her or God also scheming to frustrate him/her?' 'What's wrong with me?' 'What's wrong with people, with the world?' 'How did I end up in a world like this?' 'Everyone is different but am I *this* different?' 'Is this destiny or just blind chance?' 'Is this the best timeline of existence I could have?' 'How did this good fortune turn up for me?'. 'How did fate come to smile on me?'

Such philosophical or existential questions must also dovetail with diametric emotions playing out within the inverse hero or heroine such as love and hate, joy and sorrow, peace and violence, goodwill and malice. In addition, the flood of existential questions can motivate the inverse hero or heroine to search for a scientific formula, a mathematical equation, a religious mantra or a secret code that reputedly might hold even the slightest promise of correcting his or her circumstances or improve destiny.

An inverse plot must basically be devoid of Aristotelian catharsis if it is to produce the diametric state of affairs which is its distinctive feature. The emotional impact of inversion will understandably leave an audience wanting the plot to go on a little longer in the hope of a more amiable resolution or in search of catharsis. They

might also wish that someone in the real world would provide them with that if the plot does not.

Crafting an inverse plot is like serving an audience with a plate of food appetizing enough to lure them to eat but conflicted enough to leave an odd taste in their mouths (at once delicious and repulsive). An inverse plot is not either tragedy or comedy just as it is not neither tragedy nor comedy. It is at once tragedy and comedy in the fullest sense of each, unlike tragicomedy that is midway between both.

Places of previous mentions of the concept of inversion as a descriptive category for a particular type of circumstances include *The African Christ* (2001) which talks about causal inversion and teleological inversion, and *Rethinking the Gift* (2004) which explores gift inversion, grace inversion and response inversion. In them, the core meaning of inversion as two levels in diametric opposition within a unit is underscored.

#### Determinants of Inversion

Although inversion shares a lot in common with tragedy and comedy, its own determinants are decisive enough to establish it on its own terms. These include: a character admired for stubbornness or perseverance in the face of odds; on behalf of the public, this character overcomes a momentous situation and becomes their hero or heroine; while people applaud that feat, the hero or heroine is privately torn asunder because the effort to achieve that feat also led to the loss of something very dear to him or her; however, only few associates, if at all, know about this loss; thus, while the public celebrates their hero or heroine, he or she participates in the celebration mainly to protect the public's sense of happiness although not doing so pretentiously while deep within is a heart overwhelmed by regrets, hence, at once happy and sad (this is not 'neither happy nor sad', 'either sad or happy' or 'half sad and happy'), at once self-fulfilled and frustrated, at once comedy and tragedy (this is not tragicomedy).

An inverse framework can also be like: a community or group is faced with a momentous situation that also creates a vacuum for potential

heroes or heroines to emerge; however, there is already someone with a hero or heroine attitude also equipped with a philosophic mind that critiques goings-on in society; this character is generally unknown or known only to a few; he or she is courageous and magnanimous but has a fault in behaviour; an interplay of knowledge, ignorance, foreseen and unforeseen circumstances take advantage of the needs and/or faults of the community and this character's to create a major problem that affects the community; another factor different from this momentous situation pushes this potential hero or heroine into an experience that becomes a turning point in his or her life; this turning point experience unfolds in a way that later connects with the (worsening) situation facing the community; thereafter, the potential hero or heroine cannot but step up to fill the hero or heroine vacuum, a decision that deprives him or her of the comforts of a self-regulated life; determined to overcome that momentous situation for the community, the hero or heroine examines and adopts an option; with some doggedness, he or she finally achieves that victory; however, while the community begins festivities in honour of their hero or heroine, he or she is privately emotionally torn asunder because unknown to (most of) the community, the process that led to that victory also led to the loss of something very dear (a person, property or virtue); although the hero or heroine had foreseen this might happen, he or she could not avoid it despite all efforts; and finally, while the hero or heroine joins the community to celebrate the victory, he or she is also ripped apart by regrets and flooded by existential questions; and lacking catharsis, the state of affairs (also triggered in the audience) is: at once happy and sad, at once self-fulfilled and frustrated.

Another descriptive though analogical scenario of inversion is: an individual is elected or volunteers to represent a community in a 100 metres competition and the trophy is a cone of ice-cream; this individual doggedly participates and actually wins the race but realizes that, in line with a premonition he or she had before and during the race, the effort to win for the community kicked up so much bile to his or her mouth that he or she is

finally unable to enjoy the sweetness of the ice-cream even as the community, still ignorant of their hero's or heroine's personal distress, carries on with the celebrations.

Yet another descriptive scenario comes like a motto: 'to heaven on reverse gear!' – depicted by someone driving from one city to another with other drivers but unlike others, the car moves forward only on reverse; and since the driver must strain more than others due to back-viewing, this causes him or her serious pains on neck muscles and shoulder muscles; and while everyone is happy to have finally arrived at the destination, this inverted driver is both happy and sad.

As it seems, it will take more creative ingenuity to write a perfect inversion than to write a perfect tragedy, comedy or tragicomedy since writing tragedy or comedy requires the production of just one state of mind, or midway between both for tragicomedy, whereas inversion requires the production of a state of mind in diametric opposition but constituting a unit and quite unlike tragicomedy. If any of these component states of mind should even slightly outweigh another, the outcome will not be inversion but tragedy, comedy, or tragicomedy.

The recommendation that an inverse hero or heroine should initially be relatively inconspicuous in the community until he or she steps up to challenges facing the community helps establish a transition from a private world and low responsibilities to a public world of taxing expectations, worldviews and policies which might occasionally conflict with the individual's and which might require him or her to surrender to the community's. Furthermore, a decision or what will motivate an inverse hero or heroine to step up to the community's needs must derive more from a character of magnanimity or vicariousness rather than from selfishness.

This understanding dovetails with Akwanya's (2008:79) analysis of Euripides' *Iphigenia in Aulis* which he describes as a situation 'where the wisdom attained by the character [Iphigenia] after a silent meditation on her fate

seems to centre on the priority of the needs of the collective over those of the individual'. Similarly, the characteristic state of affairs surrounding an inverse transition from private to public circumstances and concession to requirements from the public dovetails with the vision of the Nietzschean declaration that 'in the heroic effort of the individual to attain universality, in the attempt to transcend the curse of individuation and to become the *one* world-being, he suffers in his own person the primordial contradiction that is concealed in things, which means that he commits sacrilege and suffers' (cited in Akwanya, 2008:32).

### **Inversion in Lived Experiences**

Every adult knows tragedy happens in the real world as does comedy and tragicomedy. Since everyone somewhat shares in this drama of life in respect of tragedies, comedies and tragicomedies, then, everyone is guilty, in a manner of speaking. This falls in line with a remark by Otten that 'in the human drama, Morrison reminds us, innocence is neither possible nor desirable' (cited in Palladino, 2008:61). Nevertheless, the exactitude with which a sequence of human actions and events unfold as tragedy, comedy or tragicomedy in works of literature usually is not the same way it unfolds in real life. Same holds true for inversion.

In other words, although inverse heroes and heroines occur in real life, the sequence of human actions and circumstantial events that unfold around them in the real world may not exactly feature all the determinants listed for inverse plots but will surely fit within an inverse framework. In this wise, inversion includes the circumstances of someone who has been so wrongly judged over an unfortunate incident that it, thereafter, significantly distorted or destroyed the person's future despite his or her innocence or spirited attempts at a second chance. Same applies to a situation where someone was misjudged and that misjudgement provides the person with a better state of life. In either case, things are not as they seem, as often said.

Inversion also includes circumstances depicting the tyranny of unforeseen circumstances over human freewill and self-determination.

Consider, for instance, a man who, after years of penury and frustrated efforts, finally lands a job interview but while on his way to the venue is hit by a drunk driver and rather ends up in a hospital, thereby losing a job opportunity he is qualified for and once again is neither able to pay for his medical treatment nor carter for his family.

Or still, victims of racist, caste or hierarchical systems that are consistently denied sufficient opportunities to exercise their human freedoms and realize their potentials no matter how hard they tried, and it even begins to look like the harder they tried, the worse their circumstances became since the system fights as hard to frustrate them. 'Keep trying; if it doesn't get better, it won't get worse' is a great motivational speech but applied to them, it falls flat on its face. Added to this list are 'victims of social existence' which is a neologism that refers to people who find themselves pushed to the margins of society not for any fault of theirs but for reasons of where and when they were born and other unforeseen circumstances. This category includes roadside beggars, dumpster scavengers, children hawking goods along the streets and at traffic jams, homeless people, impoverished petty traders, hapless refugees and migrants, poorly educated and jobless people for reasons of poverty, people wrongly accused and punished for crimes, and other such categories of disadvantaged people. Life circumstances such as these will meaningfully fall within the frameworks of inversion under the pen of a creative writer.

Still worthy of mention are people who discover what seems to be a pattern in their lives as circumstantial events interact with human actions to always put them at the losing end of things no matter how hard they fought to avert or overcome what appears to be their unwelcome fate. This includes people who seem always or often unlucky compared to peers facing similar challenges in life. There are, of course, people who seem to be under a spell of some sort or even cursed!

Some inverse heroes and heroines might seem to carry the weight of the world's problems on their shoulders and feel like it is their bounden

duty to find solutions to critical problems of society while they watch their peers mostly want to just live and enjoy life as it is and advance their careers. Under the strong influence of this solution-questioning mindset (probably a messiah complex), they will be prone to a level of self-withdrawal from certain social interactions in order to devote more time to accomplishing that deeply-felt social obligation. Furthermore, they might end up left with no option than to step up to certain challenges facing their society even when that decision later puts them in trouble and torn asunder by frustrations and regrets. However, for them, that act of stepping up was their one and only credible or inevitable path to self-fulfilment.

#### **Inversion and “the Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”**

T. S. Eliot’s poem, ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,’ which is a reflection on certain social conditions, was published in *Poetry* magazine in 1915 and exhibits the style of stream of consciousness characteristic of modernism. However, it does not sufficiently exhibit features of inversion but comes close to offering a description of circumstances similar to an inverse hero’s or heroine’s battle with diametric emotions. To some critics however, the famous opening lines of this poem – ‘When the evening is spread out against the sky / Like a patient etherized upon a table’ (lines 2-3) – are very disturbing especially when judged against the background of its period in literary history when Georgian poetry was praised for close affinities with nineteenth century Romantic poetry.

In addition, as Hart (1965:254) points out, Eliot’s first volume of verse, *Prufrock and Other Observations*, which was published in 1917, generally ‘had a tone of flippant despair’ and while ‘the Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’ and a few others exhibit the rhythms and techniques of ironic contrast familiar to some French *Symbolistes*, Eliot’s poetic expression of conflicted existential conditions comes to a climax in ‘the Waste Land’.

With reference to Eliot’s poetic vision in exploring conflicted existential situations, Spiller et al. (1963:1341) in turn opine that Eliot’s ‘ethical values gave him far more insight into the meaning

of history, just as his projection of spiritual struggles endowed his monologues with a dramatic tension.... As a result, his Prufrock, Sweeney and Gerontion, sparsely drawn as they were, became some of the most living characters of their time’.

In its style as a dramatic monologue, ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’ explores the existential conditions of a man torn asunder by conflicting thoughts and emotions while incapacitated by timidity and diffidence to approach women he is interested in and who would be delighted to get his attention. Lines 12-14 say:

Let us go and make our visit.  
In the room the women come and go  
Talking of Michelangelo.

However, he turns out a disappointment to himself and chides himself for lacking the courage and vision to step up to that dream. Lines 50-53 say:

Do I dare  
Disturb the universe?  
In a minute there is time  
For decisions and revisions which a minute  
will reverse.

On a general note, a conflicted state of mind such as assailed Prufrock can be the outcome of inner conflicts between an individual’s inclinations and socio-moral expectations (even in a Freudian sense). It can also be the result of conflicts between the interests and worldviews of two different groups to which an individual belongs or between a society or group and public expectations from this group at the centre of which is the individual.

#### **Inversion and *Prometheus***

Aeschylus’ *Prometheus Bound* is another work that comes close to inversion. The plot of this drama will need some re-writing in some important respects to make it an inverse drama.

Firstly, *Prometheus Bound* talks about a time when Prometheus intervenes in the affairs of humankind and by giving humankind the gift of fire rescues them from the tragic consequences of ignorance and annihilation by Zeus who has plans

to replace humankind with a new race of creatures. An inverse plot will include a time when Prometheus is a relatively inconspicuous figure before realizing and stepping up to the threats and challenges facing humankind.

Secondly, a different but related personal experience is what will unfold as the turning point experience that will motivate Prometheus to step up to those threats and challenges on behalf of humankind. In other words, Prometheus will neither be getting into this vicarious deed without a preceding turning point experience in his life nor doing so merely to spite Zeus by standing in his way.

Thirdly, although Zeus later incarcerates Prometheus for rescuing humanity from both ignorance and annihilation and for sabotaging his plans, Prometheus will not be the proud character seen in *Prometheus Bound*. He will not be arrogantly and elaborately ridiculing Zeus in the midst of his humiliations and sufferings. On the contrary, even if an inverse Prometheus will need to ridicule Zeus, more attention will rather be given to highlighting the inverse situation of his emotions and the flood of existential questions emanating from that condition. Prometheus will be grappling with the experience of being torn asunder between joy and sadness, self-fulfilment and frustration over what he has accomplished for humankind since the same process that led to victory also led to losing something too precious for him to bear which he alone (or, and a few others) knows. Furthermore, this inverse state of affairs will be seen to get worse the more humankind holds feasts in his honour unaware of Prometheus' inner sufferings while Zeus intensifies his punishments too.

Fourthly, an inverse Prometheus will effectively hide his grave personal loss and sufferings from the cheering public except for a few in his privy in order not to dampen the public's festive mood and undermine the integrity of his hard-won victory.

Fifthly, an inverse Prometheus will not find or derive any catharsis from his inverse state of affairs (neither will the audience watching or reading the inverse drama and this will leave the

audience wishing the drama did not end where it ended but continued until an amiable resolution was contrived for Prometheus' fate).

Seventhly, flipside of this state of affairs, Prometheus' inverse situation could equally be that, in the process of intervening on behalf of humankind, he gains something very precious (rather than losing one) which only he (and a few in his privy) knows whereas he fails to accomplish what he set out to accomplish for humankind, which probably makes matters worse for humankind. In reaction, humankind rises in rebellion against Prometheus but who rather carries on in a celebrative mood although, as with every inverse plot, he ends up torn asunder between joy and sadness, at once self-fulfilled and frustrated, and from this there will be no catharsis.

#### **Inversion and Major Highlights of Tragedy**

A critical look at tragedy and comedy will bring to the fore areas of convergence and divergence with inversion, which will facilitate a better understanding of inversion as a new contribution to literature and literary criticism.

Since Aristotle's *Poetics*, tragedy has always attracted a great deal of critical attention probably much more than comedy and tragicomedy. In Schopenhauer's (1969:252) view, tragedy deserves to be called 'the summit of poetic art', a view that claims a very important position for tragedy in literature. Yerima (2003:46) makes the relevant contribution that as a word, tragedy comes from two Greek words, 'tragos' (goat) and 'ode' (song) and locates the origin of tragic drama in the 'celebration and worship of the Greek god, Dionysus, who was a god of nature and fertility [the three fecundity or Dionysian festivals were Lenaea, Rural, and the City of Great Dionysia] quite as much as the god of wine' and in ceremonial rites at the gravesides of culture-heroes and demi-gods.

Nwabueze (2011:11-12) in turn makes the interesting contribution of providing a description of the first ever drama which was performed on stage by Thespis (550-500 BCE) in the sixth century BCE during a feast of Dionysus and at which about fifteen thousand Greek citizens were present. He

narrates how, in the course of the ceremony, Thespis breaks away from a chorus of fifty men performing dithyramb and impersonates Dionysus and that by this singular act, Thespis accrues acclaim as the first ever actor (*hypocrite*, which literally means *answerer*) and first ever writer of tragedy.

On a general note, however, Aristotle's *Poetics* plays a significant role in the popularity and critical appreciation of tragedy. His definition and analysis of tragedy – largely anchored on his admiration and analysis of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* (first performed around 429 BCE), which he considered the perfect tragedy – has influenced thinking since then. As he states in Part VI of this landmark work, *Poetics*,

Tragedy, then, is 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; with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its *katharsis* of such emotions.

Aristotle also strongly recommends that every tragedy must have these six parts which will in turn determine the literary quality of the work, namely, plot, characters, diction, thought, spectacle, and melody.

Aristotle goes on to consider tragedy as higher and more philosophical than history given that history is a narrative that *tells* what happened in the past whereas tragedy is a representation that *shows* what could happen under certain circumstances, that is, according to probability or necessity ('the law of probability or necessity'). In this wise, while history focuses on particular events at particular moments in time, tragedy focuses on events with general applicability across time and space or events with universal purview.

Known determinants of tragedy include the following: a hero or heroine character; noble or courageous but with a fault in attitude; ignorance or unforeseen circumstances take advantage of the

fault; thereafter, the hero or heroine encounters a momentous situation where he or she has to make a choice between two or more difficult options; he or she makes a choice by force of habit; however, the choice triggers a series of events that inexorably draw him or her into a deplorable (distasteful or fearful even to the audience) experience; although the hero or heroine fights back to overcome all that, he or she loses; in addition, there is a reversal of fortune much like a fall from grace to grass; nevertheless, from the knowledge the hero or heroine gains from all those unfortunate experiences, he or she acknowledges that unforeseen circumstances were more to blame than personal faults (which makes the audience pity him or her as a victim of circumstances, especially when this sad turn of events show the hero's or heroine's sufferings far outweigh personal faults); and yet (as the drama draws to a close), by the same force of habit or strength of character, the hero or heroine reaches out to the future in the hope of better times (which provides catharsis).

This angle about how unforeseen circumstances enormously affect the circumstances of persons of interest is also clearly seen in inversion. As said earlier, inversion includes a depiction of the tyranny of unforeseen circumstances over human freewill or freedom of choice, human freedoms and powers of self-determination.

Another area of convergence between tragedy and inversion is conflict. Each of them affirms the important roles conflicts can play in the unfolding of situations around persons of interest. It is in respect of this role that Devi (2013:1) points out that,

The basic element in determining the action of a play is the dramatic conflict which grows out of the interplay of opposing forces in a plot. The opposing forces may be ideas, interests or wills. While presenting the conflict there must also be a cause of opposition, or a goal within the dramatic action of the play. The real plot of tragedy begins with the opening of a conflict and ends with its

resolution. The middle of the tragedy consists of the development and fluctuations of the conflict. The greatness of a tragedy depends on the manner the dramatist initiates, develops and concludes the conflict, the way how [sic] he handles it.

Devi's contribution provides an understanding of how classical Greek tragedies make good use of external conflicts whereby tragic heroes or heroines must confront the more powerful forces of fate or factors beyond their control, as seen in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* and *Antigone*, to attain their end. Furthermore, modern tragedies usually replace the irrational forces of fate with age-old worldviews and social norms which come in conflict with the views or inclinations of main characters, as seen in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and *Julius Caesar*. However, as Devi (2013:1) underscores, both internal and external conflicts can effectively be at work in a single plot to make it more captivating, as seen in the circumstances of Orestes, Medea and Oedipus.

Among other things, conflict situations can be effectively articulated using a *pharmakos* trope. A *pharmakos* framework usually involves ritual cleansing by means of a human *pharmakos* (φάρμακός; scapegoat or carrier) who is socio-culturally understood as embodying, through a process of ritual imputation, a community's social and metaphysical defects that threaten its life force or wellbeing. The ritual killing or banishment of a *pharmakos* from the community is, thus, understood as the liberation of the community from the consequences of those defects or as a communal transition from sickness to health or death to new life.

Known fragmentary writings by Hipponax in the sixth century BCE and Petronius in the first century BCE highlight *pharmakos* rituals in the ancient Hellenic world, a practice that also existed in some other ancient cultures of Europe and Africa where *pharmakoi* referred to victims used for ritual cleansing. A *pharmakos* can be an animal but if human, the person usually will be a marginal

individual such as a physically deformed person or a poor person. As a cultural practice, it was prevalent especially in caste societies. The human victim can either volunteer or be selected with or without its consent. Derrida's application of deconstruction to some of Plato's writings like *Phaedrus* (circa 370 BCE) indicates that the term *pharmakon*, which connects with related terms like *pharmakeia* and *pharmakeus* but without *pharmakos*, has a range of meanings, which besides scapegoat, includes poison and remedy – even magician (cited in Johnson, 1981:63-171).

Aristotle's declaration that a work of drama will have a beginning, a middle and an end applies not just to tragedy, which he gives more attention, but also to comedy, tragicomedy, and now, inversion. However, as can be seen in some modern works, action can begin somewhere in the middle (*in medias res*) but incorporate a flashback somewhere before the end to provide relevant information. Nevertheless, it is an open question whether a flashback can be introduced after the end of a drama like an afterthought, just like when someone is telling a friend a story and after concluding it, the friend picks up an aspect and gets the narrator to say something more about it.

In line with what Aristotle recommends for plots, McManus (1999:2) explains that standard tragedies must consist of three parts, namely, an incentive moment (a sequence of actions and events that begin a plot and lead up to–), a climax (a sequence of actions and events that constitute the high point of the plot, where tragedy unfolds but leads on to–), a resolution (a sequence of actions and events that constitute the end of the drama and incorporates catharsis). The causal movement from an incentive moment to a climax is known as complication (*desis* or tying up) whereas the more rapid movement from the climax to a resolution is known as the unravelling (*lusis*) or context (*dénouement*).

Other important concepts in the development of a tragic plot include *hubris* (extreme human pride or self-confidence that undermines deities and attracts punishment), as shown, for instance, by the character, Elesin, in

Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975), for considering himself deserving of even inordinate favours by reason of his exclusive role as the king's horseman both in this life and in the next, and *hamartia* (a serious mistake or error in judgment), exhibited by both Elesin and the colonial district officer who dared to imprison him to prevent him from performing his role as *pharmakos* on the grounds that it was a barbaric practice.

In addition to McKenna's (1991:490) view that 'an essential characteristic of any tragedy... is the issue of a tragic character's discovering some essential truth, of achieving some growth in self-understanding', some more important concepts for tragedy are *peripeteia* (reversal of intention), which Elesin exhibits as a consequence of his incarceration, and which causally leads to *anagnorisis* (recognition), when the devastating implications of his inability to perform his ritual suicide on schedule dawn on Elesin, and which causally go on to lead ultimately to a *catastrophe* (the spectrum of socio-religious misfortunes and crises that befall a community as a consequence of failure or delay in a *pharmakos* ritual), which, in Elesin's case, includes troubling uncertainties about the future of a child he fathered outside marriage, the suicide of his own son, Olunde, as replacement for his own failed ritual suicide, and later, Elesin's suicide of attrition which, like Olunde's, however, does not satisfy ritual requirements.

While these important features of tragedy can also be found in inversion, they all rather amount to just one out of the two streams that constitute inversion, the other being comedy. In other words, inversion applies to a plot that is at once tragedy and comedy, each stream unfolding at its full length, in equilibrium with the other, and both of them constituting just one integrated unit and devoid of catharsis.

#### **Inversion and Major Highlights of Comedy**

Comedy can also make good use of conflicts in plot development. However, comedy generally downplays conflicts and when employed, they are resolved in very decisive ways that push

attention more towards an amiable state of affairs as a final outcome.

Major determinants of comedy include the following: a main character does not suffer; if he or she does suffer, it will be briefly and as prelude to better times; hard times that might come to him or her could be deflected by actions and events to some other people; an amiable, comfortable or humorous state of affairs is given more attention; this emasculates suffering, fear and pity, and by implication renders catharsis irrelevant.

According to Akwanya (2008:39), although some modern critics consider 'revel' to be the underlying principle of comedy, comedy is so pluriform that it cannot be easily reduced to any single principle. Akwanya also recalls Sewall's view that great comedy gains its power from its sense of tragic possibility just as great tragedy includes a possibility of turning out a comedy.

Comedy is mostly known for its fun side or happy endings. While comedy has been made to come in a variety of forms and for different purposes, Park et al. (2006:159) note that many scholars concede it is often difficult to separate social commentary and satire from ideological reproduction of racial stereotypes in comedy. In this wise, the question becomes whether viewers laugh 'at' stereotyped minority figures or 'with' them.

Alberti and many other critics, however, accept that the humour and satire characteristic of plots of comedy can be effectively deployed for serious objectives such as criticism of aspects of social life or people in authority. This is seen, for instance, in the evolution of the Russian *anekdot* (a critical often political joke) and in George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945).

#### **Inversion and Questioning of Aristotelian Catharsis**

Inversion is constituted devoid of catharsis and even though it includes tragedy as one of its constituent streams, its cathartic aspect will have to be eliminated or nullified. Comedy, the other constituent stream, does not require catharsis since any conflict woven into it is amiably resolved before the end of the plot. Furthermore, catharsis

cannot pretend to be indispensable for serious plots. Notwithstanding the humour, comedy can also effectively handle serious matters in drama.

Aristotle could have recommended catharsis for tragic plots out of personal bias rather than from any inner logic of tragic sequences. Aristotle was nurtured in a Greek society evolving with increasing disposition towards military, ideological and territorial expansion beyond its borders, a factor that circumscribes the rise and fall of the Greek empire (circa 800–146 BCE). In this wise, Aristotle's Greece was highly invested in a colonial and hegemonic mindset and would desire every conquered population to go on with their lives feeling pacified for surrendering to their new fate, hence catharsized after the tragedy of confrontation with a superior or luckier Greek army than nurse self-pity, fear and resentment, which predictably can motivate rebellion. This thinking probably inspired Aristotle to recommend catharsis for tragedy.

Colonizers, like the Greek society of Aristotle's time, hardly objectively comprehend the destructive impacts of their social structures on colonized people and are wont to deploy every means within their powers (including promulgating ideological directives about literature) to protect that system. However, as Eagleton (1976:3) points out, 'an ideology is never a simple reflection of a ruling class's ideas; on the contrary, it is always a complex phenomenon, which may incorporate conflicting, even contradictory, views of the world'.

Such expansionist programs in the ancient world can be considered the earliest roots of globalization. In this vein, Herrington (2013:155) notes that the 'homogenization thesis posits that globalization will lead to a linguistic, religious, and cultural convergence that ultimately reduces diversity everywhere'. Other critics like Friedman and Scholte warn that globalization could erase or gravely undermine indigenous heritages and languages as well as ecological and cultural diversities (cited in Herrington, 2013:155).

It is also important to note, as Charles-Louis de Secondat recounts, that Aristotle advised

his former student, Alexander the Great, to treat fellow Greeks with dignity but conquered Persians like slaves (cited in Pagden, 2008:67). Treating people like slaves means treating them with contempt and to subject them to ideological and practical social frameworks that preclude, deter or stamp out dissent, resistance and rebellion. By implication, Aristotle preferred Greek empire's conquered peoples pacified and resigned to their fates. In this wise, bias rather than logic was probably behind Aristotle's recommendation of catharsis for tragedy.

It is also significant that despite his reverence for Aristotle, Alexander the Great rather implemented a policy of respect, integration and reconciliation with conquered people. This had the intended effect of putting him in a good light with them and placating or ameliorating the circumstances of those conquered people and their deposed rulers and which, thus, undermined potential rebellion. However, this policy too had a cathartic effect as intended.

Had Aristotle been a citizen of a conquered nation, a deposed ruler or a slave, it is less likely he would recommend catharsis since a state of mind like that would deny him and fellow citizens the visions and opportunities of recovering their independence whether by peaceful or violent means. A thinker writing from the flipside mindset of a captive or slave would rather more likely recommend not catharsis but *memento*, which here refers to designated indices or factors that remind one and relive memories of a significant event such as a tragic experience and also motivate one towards a reawakening, a resurgence or rebellion.

This critical questioning of Aristotle's catharsis so far has shown how personal interests or socio-political bias can affect how one approaches literature. Literature can indeed be politicized, which is also in line with Aristotle's popular dictum that the human person is a political animal (πολιτικὸν ζῷον), a view that has been meaningfully explored by Mulgan and some other critics. Many people today are inclined to believe that political aggression and domination are integral to social development and transformations

as people compete for the world's limited resources. No wonder too that in his *Grundrisse*, Karl Marx (cited in Eagleton, 1976:5) offers a broad view whereby the history of art is considered an evidence of complexity in the relationship between the base (the economic structure of a society) and the superstructure (totality of ideologies: politics, literature and art, philosophy, law, and so forth).

The questioning of Aristotelian catharsis has, thus, shown that socio-cultural bias and personal interests can really affect how one approaches literature, which lends weight to Wa Thiong'o's (1981:ii) thesis that 'Literature cannot escape from the class power structures that shape our everyday life. Here a writer has no choice. Whether or not he is aware of it, his works reflect one or more aspects of the intense economic, political, cultural and ideological struggles in a society.... Every writer is a writer in politics'. Marxism provides an even more critical description of literature as an element of the ideological superstructure which is heavily subject to dynamics in the economic base (Habib, 2005:530-33) and which the ruling class or bourgeoisie who own the means of production can use like a tool both to exploit the proletariat and protect the status quo, as Marx elaborately argues in *Capital*, and with Engels, in *The Communist Manifesto*.

### Conclusion

Aristotle and many other philosophers and literary writers have contributed so much towards better understanding of the interpenetration between philosophy, social criticism and literature. However, in zeroing in on tragedy and comedy as the only two major categories of life experiences and literature, they missed yet another major category, 'inversion'.

'Inversion' is a unit constituted equally by a full stream of tragedy and a full stream of comedy, the outcome being a state of affairs at once sad and happy, at once frustrating and fulfilling, at once tragedy and comedy and which is unlike tragicomedy.

Detailed exploration of inversion has shown it has important areas of convergence with

the others as well as important areas of divergence, which includes absence of catharsis in inverse plots. It is understood that the Aristotelian stipulation that tragic plots must have catharsis more likely derived from Aristotle's socio-cultural bias and personal interests than from any inner logic of tragedy.

Recognition, use and critical exploration of inversion going forward will fill an age-old gap in literature and both broaden and enrich the purview of works of literature and literary criticism.

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