



AN CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF A. NICOLL'S *THEORY OF DRAMA*

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ABSTRACT

Allardyce Nicoll is a well known critic as well as philosopher. "The Theory of Drama" is a famous critical work by Allardyce Nicoll. In this famous critical work, Nicoll comments on the meaning of drama, and the judgement of drama, the forms of drama and the dramatic conventions. The concept of the famous three unities has been discussed in the chapter "The Dramatic Conventions." Nicoll says that some attention must be given to "the three unities" which has formed the focus of dramatic criticism for centuries. A. Nicoll is one of the best critic who describes the drama and its dramatic conventions and as well as the forms and utilities of drama. The present research article deals with the Nicoll's "Theory of Drama" and the concept of three unities in drama presented by Allardyce Nicoll and this essay discusses the concept of style and character in drama or any dramatic work. Then at last we discuss Nicoll's view about Tragedy, Comedy and tragicomedy in his theory of drama.

INTRODUCTION

Dramatic Theory is a subject which has occupied the minds of many of the most brilliant literary critics and philosophers from the very dawn of European theatrical art in ancient Greece down to our present days. The drama is at once the most peculiar, the most elusive, and the most enthralling of all types of literature. It is so deeply associated with the dependent upon the whole material world of the theatre, with its universal appeal; it lies so near to the deeper consciousness of the nation in which it takes its rise. It is so social in its aims and its appreciation, it is so prone to descend the uttermost depths of buffoonery and of farce, and yet ascends so easily and so gloriously to the most magnificent heights of poetic inspiration, that it stands undoubtedly as the most interesting of all the literary products of the human intelligence. So, we can say that drama is one of the most important literary forms and the theory of drama is discussed in this particular essay.

DISCUSSION

Allardyce Nicoll begins with the difficulties of the dramatic theory. He says that there are few readers who possess the power of visualizing theatre, scenery and actors. It is true that some modern dramatists like Bernard Shaw provide lengthily stage directions to make it easy for the reader. But even their aids also don't show their desired effect. The majority of readers are so dominated by purely literary conceptions that they fail to grasp the effect of a particular scene in theatre. Secondly, theatre has changed continually in shape and equipment. This makes it difficult to understand properly. In case of an average person, the problem is even more critical. Nicoll believes that the play write must keep all these factors in his mind. He should never forget the spectators before whom his work is to be performed. The greatest of all problems faced by the dramatic critic is concerning the relationship between the play and the theatre. There can be no doubt in the fact that drama is distinguished from

other literary forms as it is written for performance in a theatre. Nicoll declares that the playwright must overcome these difficulties to produce the desired effects of drama. Nicoll then comes to the issue of moral in drama. He raises the question that a fine theatrical performance should be only entertainment or something more than mere entertainment. There are different opinions to this question. Someone is of the opinion that drama should not be for pleasure alone. They believe that both delight and instruction should be the aim of the dramatist. The same thing according to Nicoll is stressed by Aristotle. Later Ben Jonson said, "TO delight and teach is the aim of drama."

The next issue is the issue of technique in drama. Nicoll gives it much importance and says that this is one of the most important issues in dramatic criticism. The technique of drama is very helpful in producing the desired effect. There are various factors related to the technique such as characters, diction, thought, decoration and music. The playwright must keep all these factors in his mind. Nicoll says that drama is the art of telling a story through dialogue and poet also has its own importance in the dramatic action. Drama is written for theatre where men come to see as well as to hear. Thus physical action is most important requirement of drama. The dramatist must present the action effectively to make the drama successful.

Then there is the medium which the dramatist employs. The language is most important aspect of a dramatist's style. One thing is absolutely clear in this case that the language of drama is not the language of ordinary life. Nicoll says that everyday language in a drama cannot be so effective. Thus dramatic language has to be different from the ordinary language of life. The dramatist has a limited time in his hand. Therefore, he must be economic in most interesting of all the literary products of the human intelligence. So, we can say that drama is the utilization of words. Nicoll says that some attention must be given to "the three unities" which has formed the focus of dramatic criticism for centuries. He starts with Aristotle who had said that tragedy, in contradistinction to the epic, had a circumscribed fictional time. The epic might deal with lengthy periods of time where as drama normally confined itself to a short period. In

addition to this Aristotle also emphasised the desirability of preserving some kind of unity in action.

Nicoll says that the later theorists took over and narrowed these judgements of Aristotle and this practice of Greek play writes. They introduced, alongside the utilities of time and action, a third unity which is the unity of place. This last is clearly demanded as a corollary (complementary) by the unity of time. Nicoll says that if we believe that the fictional action should be restricted to a length of time roughly the same as that taken up by the performance of the play on the stage, then it follows that we should also restrict the place of the fictional action to one locality.

Nicoll then makes a survey of the ideas on the issue since Aristotle. He believes that there has been frequent change in the theories from Aristotle to the modern period. The development of the ideas starts with Robertelli's commentary upon Aristotle which appeared in 1548. It was commented that there ought to be limitation of the space of fictional action. Initially, the length of the action was suggested up to twelve hours. Later, the length of the time was extended to twenty-four hours. Later these ideas were passed on the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Chapelain admitted a single natural day for time and demanded a single place for action. Cornille in 1660 decided similarly that "there is absolute necessity for the dramatic author to observe the unities of action, place and time." Milton declared that the drama should take a space of twenty-four hours.

Later, the trend of critical opinions moved towards the romantic standards. Although some writers like Byron and various critics still wished to apply the old rules. Gorthe spoke firmly against the unities in 1825 and two years later Victor Hugo declared that in spite of the ruler, the Greek theatre was much freer than the modern. Nicoll comments that from the examination of various views it is obvious that the whole theory of the unities in modern theatre depends on the assumption that the individual spectator is decided into believing the fictional representation to be reality.

Nicoll then comes to the point of the unity of action. He believes that the unity of action, though it is closely allied to the other two, must be

kept distinct from them. It is because it raises the problems of an entirely different kind. In general, it may be said that the unity of an action presupposes that no sub plot of importance should be made to appear in any serious play. Secondly, no mixture of tragedy and comedy is permissible. Both these assumptions raised much controversy in the early period of modern criticism. Nicoll makes a survey of various critical opinions related to the unity of an action. He comes to the conclusion that it is impossible to suggest a universal pattern for the observation of these rules.

Finally, Nicoll comes to the unity of impression. He says that the whole issue may be summed up by saying that in drama, the one essential unity is the unity of impression. The unity of impression is also linked to the other unities. It is basically related to the effect which the whole drama will have on the average audience. Nicoll further says that the unity of impression appears to be the most important as it is related to the overall effect of the play.

According to Martin Esslin, drama is the most social activity as there are various people associated in a drama such as the playwright, the actors, the designers, the costume-maker, the light engineer and even the most important factor is the audience. We find that the script of a drama is fixed while the performance of the same drama at different places is different. It is because sometimes it depends on the mood of the actor, how he plays the acting. Now on the stage there may be the fusion of a fixed and a fluid performance. But in the mechanically recorded types of drama - like the cinema, the radio play or the T.V. plays, the acting or the performance remains the same and fixed. Even then there may be a change of technique in the due course of time for T.V. drama or the recorded drama and they may be far better today than that of the past time. In spite of a lot of change in technique, there are some plays or films or the acting played by the actors are still famous like the acting of Charlie Chaplin.

Esslin observes that the most important component of any dramatic performance is "the actor." It is the actor who speaks the dialogue and makes the meaning of the text clear. That is why the people go to theatre to see the actors, to listen to their voice, and even regard them as artists. Nobody can deny

the fact that the drama arouses the desires of man and woman for love with erotic components. For example, we enjoy William Shakespeare's poetry in a play like "Romeo and Juliet" not only because of its supreme poetry but also the poetry is embodied by a beautiful young man or a woman who arouses our desires. The spectator listens to the poetry sung by a young man or woman in love, he associates himself to that character and there becomes a division between body and mind or the earthly and spiritual. According to Esslin, "The actors embody and interpret the text provided by the author." And it would seem that they are entirely free to do this in any manner they like. But that is true only up to a point. For the author has at his disposal a very powerful instrument for imposing on the actors the manner of interpretation he desires. That instrument is "Style."

Sometimes the dialogue written in a poetic style becomes difficult to speak for an actor with action or right expression of gestures. So he tries to change that poetic piece into prose piece and makes it clear before the audience or the spectator. That is why a famous playwright Brecht mentions, "The dramatist should use gestural language which means that he should write in a way which exposes the right style of movement and actions on the actor, compelling him to conform to writer's idea of how the words should be acted."

The style of writing a drama fulfils another function as well. It is an informational function towards the audience. By the style in which a play is written the audience is instantly being made aware of how they are to take the play, what to expect from it, on what level they ought to react to it. The reaction of the audience is greatly dependent on their expectations of what they are under the impression that the play is funny, they will be more readily inclined to laugh. The audience is made aware if the play is comedy, tragedy, farce etc. otherwise the audience, without advance information of the style of the play, cannot make clear whether they are to laugh or weep. At the first performance of 'Waiting for Godot' by Beckett, a play in a style highly unusual at the time, the audience did not know how to react, whether to laugh or to cry. But in most cases- in established conventions- the style of speech, the style of acting, the style of the setting, the style of

costumes, conveys the required information to the audience and enables them to pitch their expectations at the desired level. Regarding the conversation or dialogues, the dramatist decides in which style he will write his play? When should he use verse and when prose? According to T. S. Eliot, "At the climax of the play it should reach an intensity of emotion which could only be expressed by the richer language and the rhythmic flow of poetry." To choose poetry style of dialogues, another reason is that sometimes the story of the play belongs to distant past and the writer does not know the real language of the past time, so he uses poetry for his characters. On the other hand, G.B. Shaw declares "How wrong it was to think of historical characters as different from ourselves in conversation." This shows that the level of language, the style in which the play is written and acted has something to do with the level at which the audience looks at characters. According to a famous Canadian critic Northrop Fryce, "Regarding drama and novel, there are four levels of discourse:-

1. If the audience is to look at the characters as infinitely above them as gods, we are in a realm and myth.
2. If the audience is to look up to them as men high above them, we are in the realm of heroic.
3. If the audience looks the character as their own level, we are in realistic terms.
4. If the audience looks down on the character, this is the ironic mode."

Mythical and heroic plays need highest flights of poetic language. Realistic novel or plays need the likewise language of the audience. If we look down the characters, the language must be of low status so that the audience may feel themselves better than the characters. In a good play, every speaker has his own style of speaking e.g. in moments when Hamlet is reflecting on his own deep emotion, he speaks in verse and when he guides or instructs the players or relaxed in Ophelia lap, he speaks in prose. And the grave diggers, who are of low level to the audience, speak lower style of language. So, the characters in a play are always in action and it is the most important style of drama.

Generally it is to be considered that the two basic genres of drama are Tragedy and Comedy. Although there are so many different views regarding a drama

but basically on the actual practice of playwriting, acting and production, these two genres, tragedy and comedy are popular. Even there is no collective opinion of the definition of these two genres. Such as there are many intermediate genres of comedy are- Comedy of manners, farce, tragicomedy, burlesque, domestic comedy, domestic tragedy, melodrama etc. of course, the simplest definition on which many scholars are agree, a play with a sad ending is a tragedy and a play with a happy ending is a comedy. This little definition can be justified by William Shakespeare's famous play "Measure for Measures". This play contains many dark and brooding events and even these are no funny incidents, even then it is considered as comedy because its end is not sad. The same example is applied to "The Winter's Tale" which is among William Shakespeare's 'Romances' but it is also considered as a comedy play because of its happy ending.

Some of the Shakespeare's historical plays have murders, killings and death but even they are not called tragedies. Another problem regarding the genre of tragedy is that in each period of history the rules for tragedy have been changed. Under the influence of French classical drama, it was regarded as axiomatic that tragedy had to have leading characters who must be the members of royalty. It was thought that only the people of such high rank could have sentiments noble enough for a tragedy. In the 18th century plays were written with a sad ending and with the leading characters from the middle classes. This was a revolution in the art of drama. It was named as 'domestic tragedy'. It was different from the traditional tragedies. Martin Esslin is fascinated by the difficult problems of the definition of the genres and their aesthetic and philosophical implications. As a drama director Esslin looks at them from a complete different angle. He thinks that the definition of the tragedy is unimportant; the importance is practical rather than theoretical. As a director, one has to make a decision about the genre to which the play one tackles should belong. It is quite possible to act a play as either comedy or tragedy.

Now there is a problem for some dramas e.g. Chekhov's play 'The Cherry Orchard' Chekhov himself says, "I call the play comedy." But the

director of the play wrote to him "this is not a comedy or a farce as you wrote, it is a tragedy." So the play like "The Cherry Orchard" can be treated as a comedy or as tragedy whether the director sees such a play as tragedy, comedy or even farce will have an immediate and very practical effect on his handling of the production; it will influence his casting, the design of the set and costumes, the tone, rhythm and pacing the performance. And above all, the style in which it is to be acted. Martin Esslin gives some examples of such dialogues that maybe an example of a high tragedy or comedy. Now the situation is that if the director or the actor of the drama thinks it is a tragedy, in this case the actor would have to bring out real anxiety, fear, the gradual dawning of the seriousness of the situation. The actor would have to develop a very high degree of empathy of identification with the characters. The actors would have to develop a very high degree of empathy of identification with the characters. The actors would have to make an immense effort to reach the highest possible pitch of emotion. As a result the timing of the scene would be slow. And then if the same dialogues are treated as a farce, they will be spoken in a farcical manner. The delivery of the lines will be very fast, Breathless in falsetto voice. There will be a cruel laughter in the dialogues.

Martin Esslin describes that there is a direct relation between the audience and characters. In a heroic and mythical world, the audience look up to the characters as god or great men. In a realistic mode they see themselves on a level with them. In an ironic mode, they feel superior to them. Now clearly the characters of a tragedy are gods or heroes and the audience look up to them. According to Freud, "In a comedy, where we laugh, the nervous energy is released. In a tragedy, the anxiety is not relieved at all and we suffer with the characters. In comedy we smile and in farce we laugh out loud." In comedy we laugh and get relieved of our negative thoughts. But tragedy provides no such relief. Even then we enjoy good tragedies like Macbeth, King Lear or Hamlet. It is also to see that tragedy provides catharsis, for centuries comedy and tragedy were strictly separate genres. They could not be mixed but there always exception. In the first folio of William Shakespeare

"Trollious and Cresside" stands between the comedies and tragedies. It is both comic and tragic, so it is tragic-comedy. In the last seventy years a separate genre has come in existence and that is Tragicomedy. The plays of Anton Chekhov, Becht, Wedekind or Pirandello belong to the nature of tragicomedy. Tragicomedy is a complex genre and one which demands a very high degree of sophistication from the audience. We can easily find the mixture of comedy, tragedy and even farce in his famous play "Waiting for Godot." The modern, highly sophisticated tragic-comic genre produces much of its effects by the sudden disappointment and redirection of these expectations.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, we can say that Nicoll has discussed almost all the aspects related to the judgement of drama. He believes that the judgement of drama depends on many factors and they all have their own importance in dramatic criticism. And then Nicoll gives a brilliant summary of all the critical opinions related to the issue of unities in drama. He declares that the observation of these rules in drama has its own importance. However, the critical opinions keep on changing from time to time and it is not possible to suggest a universal method for the observation of these rules. And after that we totally say that the characters in a play are always in action. Action is the most important style of drama. So the characters, the dialogues, the action, the rhythm, emotions, are such characteristics of drama which makes the style of drama. The theory of genres deals with abstract concepts of great importance and purity. Its study is essential for anyone who wants to understand drama and through its human nature itself. The theory of genres can be very important aid to the director because it enables him to make essential decisions about the style in which a text is to be acted or played on the stage.

WORKS CITED

A. Nicoll "The Theory of Drama."