



‘The Death of Venus’: Analysing the Connecting Depictions of Beauty and Tragedy in Literature

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Abstract— *Two major themes that have been depicted in literature of nearly all periods, through various symbols and characters, have been ‘beauty’ and ‘tragedy’. From ancient to contemporary authors, these concepts have intrigued psyches and have made their way into many stories, be it classics or folk tales. This paper analyses four major instances where these two predominant subjects have overlapped, from the works of Homer and Ovid to the more recent Oscar Wilde; highlighting the concurrence of the two major ideas.*

Keywords— *Beauty, classics, Homer, Oscar Wilde, Ovid, tragedy*



I. INTRODUCTION

“...though the objects themselves may be painful to see, we delight to view the most realistic representations of them in art, the forms for example of the lowest animals and dead bodies.” Thus states Aristotle in the Poetics. ‘Beauty’ has been prevalent as a major theme in literature, from the world of antiquity to the contemporary sphere. The representation of beauty has varied, from being depicted through the looks of characters, to focusing on the beauty that can be found in nature. One theme that has repeatedly remained accordant with the depiction of beauty, however, has been that of ‘tragedy’; depicted recurrently through the grim fates that often befall such characters and the ones around them, emphasising their mortality. This concordant motif is often seen as a ‘punishment’ for a character’s physical allure. The four major characters’ instances this paper focuses on are: Helen of Troy, Achilles and Patroclus, Narcissus, and Dorian Gray.

II. HELEN OF TROY

Helen, lauded as the most beautiful woman in Greece, serves as the indirect cause of the Trojan War in Homer’s Iliad. The wife of the Spartan king Menelaus, she fled to

Troy with the Trojan prince Paris during her husband’s absence; which ultimately led to the war. While Helen and her abduction are not the sole reasons behind this war, they are indispensable ones; as they threaten the honour placed by the Greek in their women. Helen, especially, occupies a central position in the surrounding narrative because of the depiction of her ‘otherworldly’ beauty, as described by Homer. She appears in shimmering garments, elusive and liminal. Her impact is conveyed not through the description of her form but through the reactions of the internal audience, who say she is ‘terribly like an immortal goddess’. Her beauty makes her both the ultimate object of desire and an emblem of the heroic enterprise. While the story has lived through many iterations over time, what remains constant is that the war is always caused by Helen as the ‘supreme embodiment of female beauty’. However, what is peculiar is the disarmament of Helen both by the poet as well as the characters. While it is accepted that she is the ultimate cause of the war, the only direct criticism she faces within the story is from herself. Her repeated self-reproaches make it clear that she considers herself to blame for betraying her husband and running away with Paris. This, coupled with the fact that there are well-known indications that the poet of the Iliad equates Helen’s voice with his own, proves that she is the penultimate factor

leading to the war between the Trojans and Greeks. When Helen is first encountered in the story, she sits weaving a tapestry detailing the accounts of the war; this incident places her as the 'weaver' of the Trojan War, equating her to the poet. While the bloodlust and honour of the Greeks may be a factor, it only comes to light in the story upon the abduction of Helen. Hence, Helen's transcendental beauty becomes sinister in its power, bringing tragedy to Troy as well as herself.

III. ACHILLES AND PATROCLUS

Achilles is another character featured in Homer's *Iliad*, a warrior made famous by the story of Achilles' heel as well as for being known as the bravest, handsomest, and greatest warrior of the army of Agamemnon in the Trojan War. He is closely associated with Patroclus, who Achilles describes as 'the man I loved beyond all other comrades, loved as my own life', which leads many to believe that their relationship went beyond mere comradeship despite it never being directly mentioned in the Homeric narrative. Their description as lovers only appears later in the works of Aeschylus, Aeschines and Plato. Accounts of Patroclus' beauty are also prevalent, such as in the account of Dares the Phrygian, he was illustrated as "... handsome and powerfully built." Due to a disagreement with Agamemnon, which led to Achilles refusing to serve in his army, Patroclus stepped into the battlefield in Achilles' armour, fighting in his place; and was thus slain by Hector. It was upon learning of this that Achilles, overcome by rage, agreed to reenter the war with the sole aim of defeating Hector, despite receiving a warning that he would lose his life if he did so. Upon killing him, Achilles drags his corpse by the heels behind his chariot. Later, it is only with the help of an arrow guided by the god Apollo that the Trojan prince Paris is able to eliminate the wrathful Achilles. Achilles and Patroclus' tragic story also recurrently occurs through various symbols or direct mentions in contemporary popular culture. Both lovers, both defined as the most handsome men in the Greek army; both suffer a miserable end.

IV. NARCISSUS

The myth of Narcissus, best known through Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, is widely known today as a lesson in the dangers of vanity, driven further by the coining of the word 'narcissism' to denote excessive interest in one's personality. Narcissus was described by Ovid as being 'a child with whom one could have fallen in love even in the cradle' when he was born. Notions of his unparalleled beauty are repeatedly confirmed throughout the story, through the instances of various men and women falling in

love with and pursuing him, including amongst them the nymph Echo. One of the nymphs who had fallen in love, spurred by the scorn shown to him by Narcissus, prayed: "may he himself fall in love with another as we have done with him! May he too be unable to gain his loved one!" Nemesis heard and granted his prayer. Interestingly, Nemesis also appears in Helen's story as her mother. This further drives home the connection between beauty and the tragedy inflicted by revenge in both stories. Narcissus thusly approaches the secluded pool which would later become his tomb. Looking at his reflection in the water, he becomes unknowingly enamoured with the beautiful youth he sees; stretching out his arms to the man. This is his undoing, as he falls into the water and subsequently drowns. On the face of it, this story carries a simple moral lesson warning against the virtues of excessive self-love. However, what is important to note yet most often overlooked, is the fact that Narcissus was not aware the reflection was his own. In his mind, the face he so obsessed over was simply a beautiful man, not his own visage. He only comes to realise his folly when he is tied to his fate; in death, he realises the beauty he found was in himself. His sin, then, was not vanity or 'narcissism'- it was his own beauty. The unfortunate accident of possessing beauty sealed him to a tragic fate. His inevitable fate is foreshadowed in the story by the words of a prophetic seer who, when asked whether the boy would live to a ripe old age, replied, 'Yes, if he does not come to know himself.'; which he does, and thus meets his end. Moreover, it is not simply the act of possessing such beauty that jeopardises him; it is also the act of being attracted to such beauty that places him in such a position. In fact, the very reason he approaches the pond in the first place is because he is drawn to the beauty of it. Thus, both the subject and audience of beauty are made victims.

V. DORIAN GRAY

In Oscar Wilde's 1890 novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the titular character, Dorian Gray, is a wealthy young man of 'extraordinary personal beauty'. He is described as '...wonderfully handsome, with his finely curved scarlet lips, his frank blue eyes, his crisp golden hair. There was something in his face that made one trust him at once [...] One felt that he had kept himself unspotted from the world.' Coincidentally, Dorian is also described to be 'a Narcissus' by Henry Wotton, establishing early on the similarity between the two young men. However, this doesn't remain true for long as Dorian soon meets Lord Henry Wotton at a session with Basil Hallward, an artist making a portrait of Dorian. Henry Wotton convinces him that youth and beauty are the only things worth having in life and admonishes him to live fully, since his own youth

must soon fade. Dorian exclaims that he wishes he could change places with the painting so that the painting would grow old but he would remain young; and the wish is granted. Innocently impacted by Henry's ideas, he throws himself into a life aimed solely at the achievement of experience; marked by sensual gratification. Soon becoming heedless to morality, his life becomes a pursuit of aestheticism; and while he remains youthful and beautiful, it is his portrait that reflects the scars of his inevitable corruption. He even considers the untimely death of his fiancée as an aesthetic event, with 'all the terrible beauty of a Greek tragedy'. As his life becomes increasingly depraved, he develops a loathing for the portrait, and ultimately stabs it in the heart, but this ends in Dorian's own death; upon which he and the picture change places, leaving him as a deformed corpse while the painting is elegant and beautiful. Dorian's life of hedonistic vulgarity can be seen as a direct outcome, once again, of simply being beautiful beyond par, and of being innocent in his youth. The characters who fall in love with his beauty suffer too, the primary ones being Sybil Vane; Dorian's fiancée; and Basil Hallward. They are both killed directly or indirectly at the hands of their beloved, after facing immense misery. Thus, we see another narrative where both the possessor of beauty as well as its admirer is inflicted tragedy upon.

VI. CONCLUSION

The vast expanse of literature contains many such narratives where the concepts of 'beauty' and 'tragedy' overlap and correlate. The four incidents cited here illustrate how these two ideas have intertwined in stories across time. Such a theme is depicted both through the dire consequences faced by the targeted character as well as their internal audience. The specific motives behind including these themes may vary depending on the respective authors, however, the large-scale commonality of these topics suggests a reason to be found in a larger mass psyche instead of specific cases and authors. The awe of witnessing unparalleled, 'otherworldly' beauty and the awe of a drastically terrible event coupled together perhaps make stories such as these more appealing to both the reader as well as the author, invoking a sense of humbleness while also reminding oneself of the inevitability of fate, regardless of whether one possesses beautiful traits or not. It serves as a reflection and reminder of our own lives; of mortality, fate and the cruelty of unwavering destiny in the face of human helplessness.

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