

Poetic Justice: An Annotation of the Moral Compass

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Abstract: This article examines Shakespearean poetic justice—where virtue is rewarded and vice punished, often with irony—through his plays and other authors'. In 'King Lear', 'Macbeth', 'Othello', and 'The Tempest', Shakespeare offers complicated versions of justice, sometimes restorative but often blemished, underscoring both divinely ordained order and tragic disorder. While villains like Edmund, Macbeth, and Iago receive their downfall, the injustice of innocent suffering, like that of Cordelia and Desdemona, undermines the idea of moral balance. The account continues to present post-Shakespearian playwrights and novelists who disrupt poetic justice. Harold Pinter's 'The Birthday Party' offers absurdist justice that is capricious and unnerving. Franz Kafka's 'The Trial' and 'The Metamorphosis' flip justice on its head, trading moral balance for existential fear and social exclusion. In these works, poetic justice reveals itself not to be a stable doctrine but a cultural instrument, mirroring changing perceptions of morality, fate, and human being.

Key Words: Poetic Justice, William Shakespeare, Harold Pinter, Franz Kafka, Absurdism, Morality

Throughout the ages, the idea of poetic justice—in which virtue is rewarded and wickedness is punished, frequently with an ironic twist—has been essential to literature and theatre. Poetic justice in literature explores that how punishment or reward is thematically related to the character's behaviour. Some of the writers have observed the role of poetic justice in real life scenarios. This paper discusses a few of Shakespeare's plays as well as the writings of other authors and dramatists.

Poetic Justice in the Plays of Shakespeare-

William Shakespeare frequently employed poetic justice to emphasize moral issues, though not always in a clear-cut manner. For example, in 'King Lear', the idea that virtue is rewarded and wickedness is punished takes on a complex and ironic form. In the play, 'King Lear', the character Edgar, the aggrieved son of the Earl of Gloucester, wins a duel against his cunning half-brother Edmund. In Act 5, Scene 3, Edgar states, "The gods are just, and of our pleasant vices / Make instruments to plague us," implying that Edmund's own transgressions were the cause of his demise. The playwright, Shakespeare has clearly suggested that Edmund's own sins led to his downfall. Similarly, the two ruthless sisters, Goneril and Regan, betray their father and also one another. Goneril who is envious, poisons Regan, then commits suicide after her disloyalty is revealed. Their moral decay is reflected in the end. Another character, Cornwall brutally blinds Gloucester before fatally wounded by his own servant. Shakespeare very deftly shows a moment of poetic reversal.

At some of the places justice fails. One cannot emphatically say that the play fully succeeds in giving poetic justice to all the characters. King Lear has to suffer a lot. Though he repents and reconciles with Cordelia, Lear's punishment seems disproportionate. His descent into madness and grief suggests that justice, if it exists, is cruelly delayed or distorted. Some of

the critics like Samuel Johnson were troubled by the lack of poetic justice in 'King Lear'. The play exposes justice as a fragile concept—sometimes upheld, often mocked. Thomas Kullmann says, "Poetic justice in Lear is a feeble etiquette—a mere poetical decency". The critic uses this phrase to suggest that its superficial and inadequate way to understand that how the fate of the characters is determined in Shakespearean tragedies. The evil characters like Goneril, Regan, and Edmund initially thrive but meet grim ends. Good characters like Lear and Cordelia suffer deeply, yet the evil is ultimately punished, suggesting divine justice even amid tragedy. 'King Lear' rather than offering comfort, confronts us with a world where justice is elusive, and suffering doesn't always make sense. Its not just tragedy—its tragedy that refuses to play fair.

Poetic justice in the play, 'Macbeth', is one of the Shakespeare's most frightening, chilling and scaring plays. It unfolds like a dark symphony—where ambition, guilt, and fate collide, and the consequences are both brutal and inevitable but at times the readers witness the satisfying moral reckonings also. The downfall of Macbeth is motivated by ambition and prophecy. Despite becoming king, he suffers from remorse and paranoia. For the throne, Macbeth murders King Duncan and other people. His rule is characterized by increasing madness, dread, tyranny and more killings (Banquo, Macduff's family). He loses his sanity, sleep, and allies. In the end, Macduff kills Macbeth because he was "from his mother's womb untimely ripped"—a breach in the witches' prophecy. Macbeth's delusion of invincibility proves to be his downfall. (Scene 8 of Act 5). This moment delivers poetic justice. Macbeth, who relied on twisted prophecy, is destroyed by its ambiguity.

Lady Macbeth experiences strong feeling of guilt and remorse. She tells Macbeth to "screw your courage to the sticking-place" and exhorts him to kill Duncan. Later, she experiences guilt and emotional distress. Lady Macbeth sees imaginary blood stains on her hands, saying, "Out, damned spot!". She has violated her own conscience. Her inferred suicide and plunge into lunacy are a reflection of poetic justice. Her over ambition an extreme desire for power causes her to crumble inwardly. Therefore, it wouldn't be incorrect to argue that the character of Lady Macbeth exhibited poetic justice. The Witches may be characterised as 'Chaotic Agents'. They never tell direct lies, but Macbeth is tricked by their riddles. Their enigmatic predictions laid the groundwork for his ascent and decline. In this case, justice is cosmic as Macbeth's demise is guaranteed by the same supernatural forces that entice him.

The play offers Justice or Fairness but with a twist. Unlike other dramas where justice is clean-cut. In the play, 'Macbeth', poetic justice is associated with psychological pain. After bringing others down, the wicked themselves fall. Before justice is served, innocent people have to suffer. Banquo is killed. Lady Macduff and her innocent children are killed. Macbeth's crime disturbs the natural order, which is restored when Malcolm, Duncan's legitimate heir, ascends to the throne. Even if the wounds are still there, the last scene provides a feeling of moral equilibrium where the readers are pleased to see that restoration of order is there. Poetic justice in Macbeth refers to the soul's disintegration rather than merely guilt and punishment. According to the play, ambition that is unbridled by morality results in mental, spiritual and physical destruction.

In the other play, 'Othello', poetic justice is a complex web in which some characters receive what is rightfully theirs while others suffer unfairly. The play leaves the readers or spectators with a lingering sense of unbalance. Shakespeare creates a universe in which the tragedy is partially illuminated by justice, but it never totally does. The character of Iago is the most fascinating as well as villainous in nature. He is the mastermind behind all devastation that takes place in the play. Iago controls Othello, Desdemona, Cassio, and Roderigo. Despite his eventual exposure and imprisonment, his punishment is simply alluded to and not

depicted. "The time, the place, the torture: O, enforce it!" declares Lodovico, referring to this evil character (Act 5, Scene 2). The reader waits for the justice to be served, but in true sense the readers never witness it.

Othello kills Desdemona. His terrible weakness is his impulsive nature, jealousy and misguided trust. He says, "Then must you speak / Of one that loved not wisely but too well," before ending his life after realizing the truth. He self-inflicted justice by killing himself. Desdemona is killed by the man she loves despite her innocence and loyalty. The ultimate injustice is her death. In her last words, she even makes an attempt to shield Othello: "Nobody; I myself." Goodbye. Her fate challenges the very idea of poetic justice. Another character of the play, Emilia very truly demonstrates bravery and moral clarity by exposing Iago's lies. However, her own husband kills her. Desdemona's death seems unjustified and terrible.

Some of the critics point out that there is a moral complexity in the character of Cassio. Despite being deceived and briefly humiliated, he ultimately makes it through and receives a promotion. His recovery seems to be a gesture to justice, and his agony is short-lived. Another character Roderigo is used and discarded by Iago and he passes away without being saved. His penalty appears to be less of a moral judgment and more of collateral damage. The play makes the argument that justice is flawed in both the actual world and Othello's world. The innocent must be destroyed before the evils are defeated. There is no justice for women in the world of Othello. Therefore, Othello's poetic justice is never quite satisfactory, even as it flickers. It makes us wonder if justice is a human invention.

Othello's own terrible weaknesses—jealousy and credulity—are the cause of his demise. His death is regarded as poetic justice. The evil Iago receives a torture sentence, but readers never see it carried out. Nevertheless, the murders of Desdemona and Emilia seem unfair, underscoring Shakespeare's nuanced conception of justice, particularly with regard to women.

In the play, *The Tempest* Prospero emphasizes mercy above revenge. Prospero forgives his foes. Such gesture of forgiveness and restoration of order reflect a more benign version of poetic justice.

Absurd Poetic Justice in Other Writers:

In Harold Pinter's 'The Birthday Party', poetic justice is elusive, unnerving, unsettling and incredibly sarcastic. In contrast to conventional narratives where virtue is rewarded and vice is punished but in Pinter's absurdist world, justice is twisted and flipped. Stanley is an abandoned pianist who hides in a run-down boarding home. He may have committed an unnamed offense. His past is murky and unclear. Goldberg and McCann arrive at the boarding home, interrogate him with eerie, frightening questions, and then drag him away. Stanley's punishment is never explained that what he is guilty of? He is crushed by an arbitrary system. The readers are unclear about his identity. In either case, 'whether he is guilty or not' moral clarity is denied to the spectator. There is disintegration of Poetic Justice during the Birthday Celebration. The readers or spectators never come to know that Stanley Webber is a villain or a victim?

McCann and Goldberg are the agents of authority. They stand for institutional power, which could be political, religious or psychological, but their intentions and motives are

ambiguous. They conceal malice under beautiful, incomprehensible rhetoric. Stanley is reduced to silence and his glasses are destroyed that symbolises 'perception'.

They administer punishment without cause. Their power seems tyrannical rather than moral. The characters Petey and Meg are portrayed as passive onlookers. Meg treats Stanley like a child and is unaware of the visitors' purpose (McCann and Goldberg). Petey does nothing though he has a faint idea that something is wrong. "Don't let them tell you what to do," is Petey's last line to Stanley, which is a feeble protest. The injustice is made possible by their inaction. They stand for the tacit cooperation of society. Rather than offering resolution, 'The Birthday Party' critiques the very idea of justice. It suggests that in modern society, punishment may come without cause, and innocence offers no protection.

Undoubtedly, poetic justice is twisted in Pinter's world. Ambiguity rules in the play. There is no distinct crime or penalty. The Absurdist justice of Pinter is reflected in the play. Language is weaponized i.e. instead of being used to convey the truth, dialogue is used to exert control.

Power is capricious. Justice is institutional and irrational, not moral. It is subverted. 'The Birthday Party' questions the concept of justice itself rather than providing a solution. It implies that innocence provides no defence in today's culture and that punishment may be meted out without justification.

Kafka's 'The Trial' is a masterwork of existential dread and irony, but it completely reverses the notion of poetic justice. Imagine a villain that is overthrown by their own plans. However, Kafka provides a sinister satire of this concept in 'The Trial'. There is inversion of Justice by Kafka. Josef K. is arrested in 'The Trial' without understanding what he did. He goes through a bizarre and confusing judicial process and is finally put to death. Till the end, Josef K. doesn't know what he was accused for? This is bureaucratic absurdity posing as law, not justice. In the novel, 'The Trial', the irony of the system is portrayed. The biggest injustice originates from the very organization designed to enforce justice. The court maintains that anything it does is only appropriate because it is the court. The concept of fairness is ridiculed by this illogical reasoning. This may be termed as 'Kafkaesque Justice', Instead of poetic justice there is poetic injustice in the novel. Josef K.'s failure to succeed stems from his incapacity to work within a system. The system is intended to perplex and undermine him rather than any moral flaw. His execution seemed unavoidable rather than morally righteous.

One of the most eerie and recognizable stories of the 20th century is 'The Metamorphosis' by Franz Kafka. It narrates the bizarre and tragic tale of Gregor Samsa. He is a traveling salesman who wakes up one morning to discover that he has been changed into a gigantic insect. It was first published in 1915. Gregor's first epiphany is- "Gregor Samsa woke up one morning from a series of tense dreams to find that he had been transformed into a hideous rodent in bed." His gradual decline in both physical and mental health as his family grows more antagonistic. This novella is highly symbolic. The writer reflects on the feeling of alienation faced by a man who he is living in the family. His identity and originality are trampled. Kafka's own sense of estrangement is reflected in Gregor's metamorphosis, which separates him from both his family and society. Although Gregor maintains his thoughts and feelings, his physical appearance causes him to be seen as a monster. The story raises questions about what it means to be human. Gregor's family progressively betrays him. The

writer portrays the fragility of the familial ties under stress. So, the relationship of family members and the family dynamics is shaken. Gregor's transformation serves as a metaphor for the loss of purpose and control in life. Kafka frequently examines the absurdity of existence or we can say existential angst in his literature. The story ends on a tragic note, in which the family experiences relief rather than grief or sorrow as Gregor passes away alone and unloved. Hence, the conclusion of the story is quite heartbreaking. A literary device known as "poetic justice" occurs when virtue is eventually rewarded and wickedness is punished, frequently in a way that is ironic or appropriate. The idea is distorted and perverted in Franz Kafka's 'The Metamorphosis' rather than providing conventional poetic justice, Kafka presents a grim reversal of it. Kafka's tale is timeless because it reflects the universal fears of losing one's place in the world, being misunderstood, and becoming a burden on others. Its a brilliant example of psychological horror wrapped up with philosophical undertones.

Gregor Samsa is a loving son who puts his family's financial needs ahead of his own happiness and well-being. After his transformation into insect he is treated with horror, disregard, and ultimately rejection. He is not nursed with kindness or appreciation. His death brings relief to his family. The readers find the subversion of poetic justice.

There is existential emptiness, anxiety, dread, vacuum, despair and absurdity in Kafka's world. The story does not promote moral balance. 'The Metamorphosis' provides an analysis of how society handles those who are no longer "useful." The absence of poetic justice is a reflection in and of itself. Kafka makes his readers believe that this world is awkward where generosity is not rewarded and suffering is not redeemable.

The role of poetic justice varies greatly across cultures, depending on the morals, fate, and narrative beliefs of each community. Although the fundamental principle—praising virtue and punishing vice—remains the same, how it is applied and what it means varies greatly depending on the cultural context.

Poetic justice isn't just about punishment or reward—it is like a lens through which different cultures and societies explore morality, fate, and human behaviour.

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