
POETIC JUSTICE IN LITERARY TEXTS

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Abstract: Literature is a mirror of life. It reflects the virtues and vices that are there in the society. The author of any literary work wants to instruct the society through his literary work that the vice is always punished and the virtue is always rewarded. So that he wants to pass on the message of morality triumphing over the immorality which is one of the main functions of literature. So poetic justice is based on the moral principle goodness is ultimately rewarded and bad is punished at the end. This is manifested in the works of classic writers like Homer, Dante, Morlowe Shakespeare, John Milton, Charles Dickens and many other writers. In most of the movies the protagonist suffers a lot from the beginning and the antagonist gets upper hand over him and tortures him. But in the anticlimax everything is topsy-turvy's and the protagonist wins either by killing antagonist or by teaching him a lesson that wicked deeds always have a bad end. So poetic justice is nothing but the victory of the virtue and the defeat of the vice. In the past ages gods and goddesses struggle a lot to justify the victory if good over evil. The great epics are the best examples in which this is manifested clearly.

Keywords: "Ethical Principle", "Entertainment", "Instruction", "Morality Of Action", "Moral Principles", "Vice", "Virtue".

Introduction: A work of literature entertains the reader at the same time it instructs him about the moral conducts. Here I have made an attempt to show how a literature passes a message to the reader by instructing him how and why he should follow the moral and ethical principles in his life. Poetic justice is based on the principles of morality in which, though, the good is punished at the beginning and bad gets a temporary victory over good, but at the end it is the good which enjoys the permanent victory.

The term poetic justice was coined by the English literary critic Thomas Rymes in the 17th century when it was believed that a work of literature should uphold moral principles and instruct the reader in correct moral behaviour.

Entertainment and Instruction are the two fold functions of literature. A literary work entertains while instructing and instructs while entertaining. Every literary work passes a message to the reader that the author wants to convey to the society. He wants to clarify what is virtue and what is vice and shows in his work that always virtue is rewarded and vice is punished at the end. *So poetic justice is a kind of justice in which virtue is rewarded and vice is punished by an ironic twist of fate intimately related to the characters own conduct.* Poetic justice is based on the ethical principles of literary criticism. As a problem study it presents the solution of two difficulties, one concerning the Greek origin of the doctrine of rewards and punishments in dramatic art, the other concerning the English basis of the same doctrine. In manner, it was necessary to examine closely the leading sources of literary criticism from Plato to Addison.

"Historically the drama takes precedence over the literary types that might be studied in connection with the poetic justice. It does not mean that other literary types are to be ignored in making complete study of this principle of literary art. Criticism of the novel, since the earlier period of development of the novel, has taken attention of which novelists have given this same principle. Narrative discourse of all types including the epic, affords discourse suitable material for the literary critic who has any interest in advocating the doctrine or in arguing against it; and to make a complete study of poetic justice it would be necessary to examine literary criticism in its bearing upon the whole field of narrative and dramatic literature.

The study of poetic justice necessarily involves a study of ethical principles in literary art: for the very idea of poetic justice implies a judgement regarding the morality of action. As a result, then, of a studying literary criticism, it is possible to come to a partial knowledge of the principles of morality by which a given race of people was governed at some given time. if, for instance, the advocates of poetic justice of one century require that punishments be meted out in atonement for the act which the advocates of poetic justice of another century might be disposed to condone, it is easy to conceive that the difference between critics implies a sort of difference in the prevailing principles of morality. Just what these principles have been in any particular period of the literary history of a race, can be somewhat determined as a result of study of the works of contemporaneous literary critics and of such contemporaneous dramatists as recognized in a practical way the principle of poetic justice".[1]

It is manifested in Ramayana and Mahabharata the two great epics of India as *'Punishment to the vices and protection to the virtues.'* Lord Krishna in Mahabharata took the side of pandavas who represent virtues and put an end to Kauravas who represents evil side of the society. Lord Krishna says,

*"Yada Yada Hi Dharmasya Glanirbhavati Bharati,
Abhyudhaanam Adharmasya Tadaatmanam
Srujamyaham Dharma Samsthapanarthaya
Sambhavaami Yuge Yuge."*

It means that whenever vice wins over virtue then he once again takes birth and protects the virtue. Rama in Ramayana who is the incarnation of Lord Krishna kills Ravana who represents evil side of the society. In Vedas and Puranas there are ample of examples in which the gods and goddesses take their birth to punish the evils and protect the good.

"Oliver Twist" is the best example of poetic justice. In the story *Mr. Bumble* is born in charge of an orphanage. He is sadist and enjoys torturing and humiliating the orphans that live in orphanage. He is also greedy; despite already having a lot he marries Ms Carney for her money, hoping to become a master of the workhouse that she owns. Instead Mr Bumble loses his post as a beadle and he does not become the master of the workhouse. His wife beats and humiliates him just like he beat and humiliated the orphans. Ultimately, the couple both windup so poor that they live in the workhouse they once owned."^[2]

In the plays of Shakespeare there is some complexity regarding poetic justice. If we take the example of King Lear Cordelia and Lear are worth characters to be rewarded but Shakespeare notoriously allows the virtue of Cordelia to perish in a just cause. In measure for measure, he allows Angelo's wicked actions to escape punishments and perpetrator to survive. Here in these plays the conventional expectations of poetic justice is not achieved. Even though the evils are punished, the virtues are not rewarded.

Dante creates an imaginative correspondence between *a soul's sin on earth and the punishment he or she receives in hell*. The sullen choke on mud, the wrathful attack on one another, the gluttonous are forced to eat excrement, and so on. This simple idea provides many of inferno's moments of spectacular imagery and symbolic power, but also serves to illuminate one of Dante's major themes; *the perfection of god's justice*. The inscriptions over the gates of hell in canto III explicitly state that god was moved to create Hell by justice. Hell exists to punish sin and the suitability of Hell's specific punishments testifies the divine perfection that all sin violates. When we read a poem as a whole it becomes clear that the guiding principles of these punishments are one of balance. The sinners suffer punishments befitting the gravity of their sin, in a manner

matching the nature of that sin.

The self fulfilling prophecy can be considered as an early example of poetic justice. One example of this is the ancient Sanskrit story of Lord Krishna where king Kansa is told in a prophecy that a child of his sister *Devaki* would kill him. In order to prevent it, he imprisons both *Devaki* and her husband *Vasudeva*, allowing them to live only if they handover their children as soon as they are born. He murders nearly all of them one by one, but the eighth child, Krishna, is saved and raised by a cowherd couple, Nanda and *Yashodha*. After growing up and returning to his kingdom, Krishna eventually kills *Kamsa*. In other words, *Kamsa's* cruelty in order to prevent his death is what led to him being killed.

Disney films, most specifically animated films often use poetic justice as an ending device. *'The Lion King'*, *'Alladin'* and *'The great Mouse Detective'* are among many other examples of poetic justice, with the hero being rewarded and the villain being punished in ironic and occasionally fatal ways.

The doctrine of poetic justice has been understood in different ways by literary critics, and has been applied so rigorously by some writers that the rejection of doctrine does not necessarily imply a denial that instruction should be the chief aim of literary art. Writing in the *Spectator* for April 16, 1711, Joseph Addison took the English writers of the tragedy to task for constructing their plays in accordance with a certain principles of dramatic art which he described as *"a ridiculous doctrine of modern criticism"* for more than a quarter of century before this time literary criticism has been making a vigorous campaign against the ethics of English drama. Beaumont and Fletcher and Jonson and Shakespeare were the most distinguished of the playwrights against whom the attack had been made. Fault was found with these because they failed to observe the law of poetic justice in the distribution of rewards and punishments. Other writers of plays were condemned because of the gross immoralities which they portrayed, and some because they violated the unities of time, place and action. Addison decided that it was time to put a stop to the excessively rigorous tactics of the critics.

English tragedy was not inferior to that upon which the laws of tragedy were founded by Aristotle, and he judged that a true interpretation of those laws would serve not only to justify the practices of artists like Shakespeare, but also to correct the mistakes which later dramatists had made. He did not propose that the dramatists should be free from all moral restraint, but he did not object to the limitations imposed on tragedy by such a law as that of poetic justice. Addison's so far as can be ascertained was the first formal expression of revolt in England against this

doctrine. He revolts by saying,

“The English writers of tragedy are possessed with a notion, that when they represent a virtuous or innocent person in distress, they ought not to leave him out of his troubles, or made him triumph over his enemies”.

This error they have been led into by a ridiculous doctrine in modern criticism, that they are obliged to an equal distribution of reward and punishments, and an impartial execution of poetic justice. Who were the first to establish this rule I know not; but I am sure this has no foundation in nature, in reason or in the practice of the ancients, we find that good and evil happen alike to all men on this side of the grave. And as the principal design of tragedy is to raise commiseration and terror in the minds of the

audience, we shall defeat this great end if we always make virtue and innocence happy and successful.

Conclusion: Poetic Justice is not just for fiction, it happens in real life as well. Many people refer to it as Karma. It can be found in everyday in big news stories and in the lives of people around us. Poetic Justice is a fantastic literary device, because it neatly ties up the loose ends of the story. In real life this is not always the case. But poetic justice can be found almost everywhere and in almost all the movies end in poetic justice. Poetic justice is a strong literary device which awakens the reader and instructs him to follow the right path. Poetic justice attains a lot of importance in modern age which is full of corruption, illegal activities etc., it brings to the reader the principle of “*as you sow so you reap*”.

References:

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