

## **Maxwell Anderson's Theory of Tragedy and its Contribution in Modern American Verse Drama**

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**doi: 10.23918/vesal2017.a7**

### **Abstract**

Maxwell Anderson (1888 –1959) was one of the age group of playwrights who participated in promoting and elevating the reputation of American drama. <sup>1</sup>He is well-known for his bringing verse drama to the American stage, in addition to his use of historical settings to deal with contemporary themes. Anderson looked at the theater as a "religious institution" and a kind of worship not as a danger as, evangelical ministers used to think about it as a gateway to hell. Anderson began searching for a guide of principles to govern his writing. He examined the successful plays of the past and discovered a group of rules that governed serious drama (especially tragedy). Anderson was fully aware that theorists had been trying to hunt the essence of tragedy since Aristotle without entire success, yet, he suggested his own definition of tragedy. In 1939 Anderson published *The Essence of Tragedy*, the first systematic theory of tragedy by an American playwright, written originally as a paper to be read at a session of the Modern Language Association meeting in New York in January, 1938, and included in *Off Broadway*, a collection of essays about the theater. Anderson in *The Essence of Tragedy* affirms that "The theme of tragedy has always been 'victory in defeat', a man's conquest of himself in the face of annihilation. . . The message of tragedy is that men are better than they think they are. This message needs to be said over and over, lest the race lose faith in itself entirely. In his illuminating essay "The Essence of Tragedy", Anderson discusses the most important elements of tragedy and evolves his own formula of poetic tragedy consisting of three steps–'victory in defeat', 'recognition of his fault' by the tragic hero, and finally 'affirmation' of the moral values underlying existence.

## **Introduction : Maxwell Anderson's Theory of Tragedy**

Maxwell Anderson (1888 –1959) was one of the age group of playwrights who participated in promoting and elevating the reputation of American drama. Those playwrights were Eugene O'Neill, Elmer Rice, Sidney Howard and Robert Sherwood; however, Anderson was more productive and adaptable than all of them.<sup>1</sup> He is well-known for his bringing verse drama to the American stage, in addition to his use of historical settings to deal with contemporary themes.

Anderson in *The Essence of Tragedy* affirms that "The theme of tragedy has always been 'victory in defeat', a man's conquest of himself in the face of annihilation. . . The message of tragedy is that men are better than they think they are. This message needs to be said over and over, lest the race lose faith in itself entirely."<sup>2</sup>

**Anderson's Formula of Tragedy** : poetic tragedy Anderson discusses the most important elements of tragedy and evolves his own formula of poetic tragedy consisting of three steps—'victory in defeat', 'recognition of his fault' by the tragic hero, and finally 'affirmation' of the moral values underlying existence.<sup>3</sup> Anderson adds that he formulated his own rule which indicates that:

A play should lead up to a central crisis, and this crisis should consist of a discovery by the leading character which has an indelible effect on his thought and emotion and completely alters his course of action. The leading character let me say again, must make the discovery; it must affect him emotionally; and it must alter his direction in the play.<sup>4</sup>

He adds later in the essay that the playwright must "build his plot around a scene wherein his hero discovers some moral frailty or stupidity in himself and faces life armed with a new wisdom."<sup>5</sup> Anderson stresses the importance of redemption through suffering that the hero should pass through. The tragic personality, according to him, must learn through suffering and suffer

death itself as a result of his fault or his attempt to correct it, but before death comes, there must be recognition of the fault, Anderson explains:

A hero must pass through an experience which opens his eyes to an error of his own. He must learn through suffering. In a tragedy, he suffers death itself as a consequence of his fault or his attempt to correct it, but before he dies, he has become a nobler person because of his recognition of his fault and the consequent alteration of his course of action.<sup>6</sup>

Anderson was plain, profound and moralistic in his opinion on the nature of serious drama in general and the tragedy in particular. He found no greater vehicle for his message of the human condition than poetry. In brief, the Andersonian definite principles that the dramatist should follow if he is to be successful are the following:

First, the play must deal with inner life; second the story must be a conflict between good and evil within a single person; third, the protagonist must represent the force of good and must win; fourth, the protagonist cannot be perfect, for must emerge a better man at the end of a play than he was at the beginning; Fifth, The protagonist must be an exceptional person ,or he must epitomize exceptional qualities ;sixth ,excellence on the stage is always moral excellence; and finally the moral atmosphere must be healthy.<sup>7</sup>

Anderson chose historical background from the past, particularly those concerning Tudor monarchs, in order to revive the old conception of tragedy, a drama of " kingly characters whose nobility in defeat and death assure the audience and readers of the worth of human personality" <sup>8</sup> The principles of Tragedy that Maxwell Anderson devised at the seminal stage of his career reaches a maturity of expression in his "history poetic plays *Elizabeth the Queen* (1930), *Mary of Scotland* (1933) and *Anne of Thousand Days* (1948).

During the time of the Reformation. Great Britain was Protestant, France was Catholic, and Scotland was torn between the two of them. Mary Stuart, Queen of Scots was born into a time full of religious turmoil. The ill- fated queen has been since her execution a source of fascination for historians, literary men and readers. Many Christians, especially the Catholic, think that the queen, who suffered betrayal, torment, imprisonment and execution, died with the charity and magnitude of a martyr. On the day before her execution, she struggled to come to peace with herself as well as with her enemies, ultimately finding the solution through suffering. Mary's beauty, charm,

undoubted courage, imprisonment and her devotion to her faith during her imprisonment made her a particularly romantic figure in history. More than four centuries after her death, Mary continues to exert her fascination over each succeeding generation and in every literary medium. She is the subject of many plays by world playwrights like Vittorio Alfieri, A. C. Swinburne and Schiller as well as three poetic plays by English speakers playwrights: John Drinkwater's *Mary Stuart*, John Masefield' *End and beginning* and Maxwell Anderson's *Mary of Scotland*<sup>9</sup> T. S Eliot ended "East Cocker," the second of his Four Quartets, with Mary's motto: "In my end is my beginning". The online edition of *Catholic Encyclopedia* indicates that "During the whole process of her trial and execution, Mary acted with magnificent courage worthy of her noble character and queenly rank. There can be no question that she died with the charity and magnanimity of a martyr."<sup>10</sup> The fanatic protestant look to Mary of Scotland differently; they consider her a schemer and sensuous queen interested in love and marriages. Mrs. George Percival Hibbert, a British author of about 200 historical novels composed a book entitled *Mary Queen Of Scots: The Fair Devil Of Scotland*(1975). As America is a protestant majority, the passive opinion concerning Queen Mary may be the reason why Louis Fantasia, the famous American actor and director, refers to Schiller's *Mary of Scotland*, and argues, "it is a play rarely performed in America, to our loss."<sup>11</sup> Milton, the famous puritan poet, accuses Charles I of being a hypocrite who imitates Mary's tragic history instead of the sacred Christian text, he adds that he is " an actor playing a role he learned from manipulative and image-conscious grandmother... imitates a feminine Catholic idol."<sup>12</sup>

Queen Mary's life possessed all the qualities of a tragic hero. She fell from her glorious status due to circumstances that may or may not have been out of her control. Anderson is not the first one who treats Mary of Scotland so benignly since Shiller and others made her lovable martyr and Elizabeth a beast. Some critics like John Gassner indicate that Anderson's *Mary of Scotland* is affected by Schiller's play of the same title, he also links Anderson's notion of the moral function of art to Schiller's theory that drama must be responsible for accelerating the moral evolution of humanity. To strengthen his argument, Gassner refers to Schiller's words in the latter essay entitled "The Stage Considered as a moral intuition":

Theater takes all human knowledge as its province, Exhaust all situations of life, and sheds light into every corner of the human heart, because it unites all sorts and condition of people and commands the most popular road to the heart and understanding.<sup>13</sup>

Anderson looked at the theater as an essentially religious right whose spiritual function had not changed since the days of the ancient Greeks. In the same way Schiller looked at it as a moral enlightenment with universal effect.

The plot of Anderson's *Mary of Scotland* can be summarized in the story of the queen who, after the death of her husband Francis II, returns to rule in a predominantly Protestant Scotland. Bothwell, her loyal subject and admirer, warns her of the situation and her cousin Queen Elizabeth, who fears her claim to the English crown and conspires from England to bring about her defeat. Mary's only true allies are her chief lieutenant, the Earl of Bothwell, and her adviser, David Rizzio. Caught in the web of deceit, Mary casts aside her love for the Protestant Bothwell and marries the weak her cousin, Henry Stewart (Lord Darnley), enraging the Protestant Lords and making it impossible for her ever to become queen of Protestant England. Elizabeth's lords kill Darnley and the blame is put on Bothwell when he marries Mary. They are accused of treason, Bothwell accepts exile in exchange of Mary's saving her crown. The pledge is broken, once he leaves, and Mary is driven into exile. She flees for safety to England, where she is imprisoned by Elizabeth. In the final confrontation scene, the two queens come together. Mary comes to realize that the envious Elizabeth skillfully plots her demise. She remains fixed to her ideal and her church, to her crown and to the royal rights of her child. While Elizabeth wins the political battle, Mary considers herself a victor, she dies as a martyr. She got married unlike Elizabeth, who stayed single and her son James will rule England and Scotland.<sup>14</sup> In *Mary of Scotland* there are a lot of sufferings and conflicts like: Mary's uncertainty over the worthiness of Bothwell's love for her, her balancing of his love over her ambition for the throne, her suffering after marrying an unworthy Colicatholic husband to promote Catholicism and her alternative of abdication or imprisonment. The outer struggle is between Elizabeth and Mary, in which evil is clearly pitted against goodness.<sup>15</sup>

*Mary of Scotland* is the first play in which of Anderson's theory of drama is fully applied and where Anderson's three steps formulas of drama can be found. They are:—first, 'recognition of the hero of his fault', second, 'victory in defeat', and third 'affirmation' of the moral values which underlie human existence.<sup>16</sup> The most noticeable features of *Mary of Scotland*, unlike the plays

that came before it, is that the protagonist has a recognition scene (in Act III) and in consequences becomes a morally better person in accordance with the requirements laid down by Anderson in "The Essence of Tragedy". Anderson says "In a tragedy, he (the hero) suffers death itself as a consequence of his fault or his attempt to correct it, but before he dies, he has become a nobler person because of his recognition of his fault and the consequent alteration of his course of action...." <sup>17</sup>

The recognition scene is the one in which Mary discovers that Elizabeth is against her this drastically alters the course of the action, for it deprives Mary of her lover, her throne, her freedom. The scene of the confrontation between the two queens: Mary and Elizabeth were purely the product of Maxwell Anderson's imagination; in real life, the two women never met. Elizabeth is old; unloved and barren. On the other hand, her rival for the crown, Mary, is just the opposite: she is young, beautiful and loved by the Earl of Bothwell. Furthermore, unlike Elizabeth, she has an heir. The problem with Mary is that she was so naïve to think that she can run a disturbed country like Scotland without having to sacrifice, as cynical Elizabeth did, her devotion to honor integrity, truth and justice. <sup>18</sup> "There is nothing like popular virtue to raise envy and therefore hatred in malignant souls." <sup>19</sup>

The following conversation between the two shows Elizabeth's Envy:

ELIZABETH:           Aye,           with           the           Stuart           mouth.  
                          And the high forehead and French ways and thoughts—Well, we  
                          must look to it. — Not since that Helen. We read of in dead Troy,  
                          has a woman's face Stirred such a confluence of air and waters.  
                          To beat against the bastions. I'd thought you taller, But truly, since  
                          that Helen, I think there's been no queen so fair to look on.

MARY: You flatter me.

ELIZABETH: It's more like envy. You see this line  
                          Drawn down between my brows? No wash or ointments.  
                          Nor wearing of straight plasters in the night  
                          Will take that line away. Yet I'm not much older. Than you, and  
                          had looks, too, once. (139-140)

Later on, Mary discovers that she was mistaken when she chose England as a refuge for she became a prisoner of Elizabeth from whom she had fully expected aid and shelter. The following

words of Mary are full of reproach and blame for Elizabeth for her selfishness as well as there is an emphasis on the idea of redemption and salvation through pain and suffering. Mary says:

And still I win.  
A demon has no children, and you have none,  
Will have none, can have none, perhaps. This crooked  
track  
you've drawn me on, cover it, let it not be believed  
that a woman was a fiend. Yes, cover it deep,  
And heap my infamy over it, lest men peer  
And catch sight of you as you were and are. In myself  
I know you to be an eater of dust.( 151)

The second step of the Anderson's formula of tragedy is 'victory in defeat', he says: "The theme of tragedy has always been a victory in defeat, a man's conquest of himself in the face of annihilation, a spiritual awakening or regeneration of the hero...."<sup>20</sup> The audiences are left to conclude that Mary's tragic flaw is in believing that she can play out the game of power politics without staining her immortal soul. She could not understand that integrity cannot be compromised with Machiavellianism. She remained unstained but suffers defeat because "her political enemies, who are blind to all moral niceties, entrap her in her own virtue."<sup>21</sup>

Elizabeth keeps her crown and Mary becomes a victim of Elizabeth's lust for power. Mary is worthy of admiration and in the end Mary emerges as a martyr figure. As a result, Mary snatches a moral victory from defeat. Mary proclaims triumphantly that she is the sole winner. Mary considers herself a victor, she dies as a martyr. She got married unlike Elizabeth, who stayed a single and her son James will rule England and Scotland:

MARY: Still, still I win! I have been  
A woman, and I have loved as a woman loves,  
Lost as a woman loses. I have borne a son,  
And he will rule Scotland — and England. You have  
no heir!  
A devil has no children. (151-2)

The tragic romantic figure of the Scottish queen "stirs the emotion not only in her native country, but in the farthest ends of the world. In that sense alone Mary's Motto 'in my end is my beginning' could not have been better chosen" <sup>22</sup>

The third step of Anderson's formula of tragedy is 'Affirmation'—, he says: "...The theater at its best is a religious affirmation, an age-old rite restating and reassuring man's belief in his own destiny and his ultimate hope."<sup>23</sup> Mary remains undaunted by Elizabeth's continual threat and by the prospect of years of imprisonment and solitude; and she rises as morally superior to her plight in the drama brilliant climax. Mary is admirable in the eyes of the audience because she is the noble victim of the conspiracy, because she does not stop to do evil just because evil is done to her, and because she does not make war on her enemies (as Bothwell advices) but rather try to win them over by fair and gentle womanly treatment.<sup>24</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Barbra Lee Horn, *Maxwell Anderson: A Research and Production Sourcebook* (London: Greenwood Press 1996), 86.

<sup>2</sup> Maxwell Anderson, *The Essence of Tragedy and other Footnotes and Paper* (Washington: Anderson House Ltd., 1939), 58-59.

<sup>3</sup> Arthur M. Sampley, "Theory and Practice in Maxwell Anderson's Poetic Tragedies" *College English*. 5, No. 8, (May, 1944), 412-18. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/371452>. (accessed December 29, 2016).

<sup>4</sup> Anderson, 58-59.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> David Krasner, ed., *A Companion to Twentieth-Century American Drama* (New York: Blackwell Published Ltd., 2008), 200.

<sup>9</sup> Jayne Lewis, *Mary Queen of Scots: Romance and Nation* (New York: Taylor and Francis library, 2005), 76.

<sup>10</sup> John Hungerford, "Mary of Scots", in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, (New York: Robert Appleton Co., 1910), Vol. 9.

<http://www.catholic.org/encyclopedia/view.php?id=7682>. (accessed December 29, 2016).

<sup>11</sup> Louis Fantasia, *Tragedy in the Age of Oprah: Essays on Five Great Plays* (New York: the Scarecrow Press Inc., 2013), 143.

<sup>12</sup> John D. Staines, *The Tragic Histories of Mary Queen of Scots, 1560-1690: Rhetoric, Passions, and Political Literature* (New York: Mpg Books Ltd., 2008), 203.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Harlan Hatcher, "Drama in Verse: Anderson, Eliot, Macleish," *The* <http://www.jstor.org/stable/804499>. (accessed December 9, 2016).

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> *The Essence of Tragedy and other Footnotes and Paper*, 58-59.

<sup>17</sup> Staines, 84.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 82

<sup>19</sup> *The Essence of Tragedy and other Footnotes and Paper*, 58-59.

<sup>20</sup> Hatcher, 74.

<sup>21</sup> James Mackay, *Mary Queen of Scots: In My End is My Beginning*. London: Mainstream Co Ltd., 2012). 11

<sup>22</sup> *The Essence of Tragedy and other Footnotes and Paper*, 58-59.

<sup>23</sup> Staines, 81.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 82

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