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THE TRAGIC ELEMENTS IN BRAD SILBERLING'S (2004) *LEMONY SNICKET'S A SERIES OF UNFORTUNATE EVENTS*

Marcellina Ariska P.N.¹ and G.M. Adhyanggono²

Abstract: Movie is a kind of literary works in addition to novels, poems or songs. There are some genres of movie; one of them is comedy. Black comedy is its sub-genre. Lemony Snicket's A Series of Unfortunate Events is a black comedy movie which includes hamartia, anagnorisis, peripeteia, and catharsis. They are the key elements of Aristotle's theory of tragedy. In this paper, the writer shows the existence of those key elements in the movie. Also, the writer explains the extent of tragic elements in affecting the story of this movie. This paper shows that from the perspective of Aristotle's theory of tragedy, Lemony Snicket's A Series of Unfortunate Events can be viewed as tragedy.

Key words: Aristotelian theory, hamartia, anagnorisis, peripeteia, catharsis.

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INTRODUCTION

Lemony Snicket's A Series of Unfortunate Events is an instance of black comedy movies. It is directed by Brad Silberling and is an adaptation of *The Bad Beginning*, *The Reptile Room*, and *The Wide Window* which are the first three books in *A Series of Unfortunate Events* by Lemony Snicket. This movie is about the Baudelaire's orphans (Violet, Klaus, and Sunny) who are adopted by a bizarre actor named Count Olaf. He attempts to steal the Baudelaire's' fortune. The Baudelaire's try to get away from Olaf any time they can but Olaf can find them wherever they go. The Baudelaire's' avoidance of Count Olaf leads these pitiful orphans into a series of unfortunate events.

This paper focuses on Aristotle's theory of tragedy which includes *hamartia*, *anagnorisis*, *peripeteia*, and *catharsis*. Aristotle was one of the important ancient philosophers from Greece. He was born in Stagira, a town in Macedonia in 384 B.C. He influenced medieval science and logic and on literary theory. His name has been associated most often with his "concepts of tragic *catharsis*, *anagnorisis*, and unity of action" (Nawaz 2011). According to Hibbard (1954) and Cooper (1997), tragedy is an imitation, not of men, but of an action and of life which arouses fear and pity.

In tragedy people are tested by great suffering and must face decisions of eventual consequence. Some meet the challenge with anger, while others demonstrate their ability to confront adversity, winning admiration and proving the greatness of human potential (Brown 2012).

Hibbard says that:

Tragedy causes the emotions of pity and fear in the hearts of all men, then affords a pleasurable relief.

In other words, the spectator at a tragedy, following the tribulations of the tragic hero, himself suffers vicariously, is emotionally moved, and as a result of the experience, finds pleasurable relief (1954: 169).

Brown explains that “in tragedy things may not turn out as we wish, but we recognize the relation between the hero’s actions and the results of those actions”, and appreciates the honest depiction of realities in life. Owensboro says that a character in tragedy is accompanied by a significant insight: a self-knowledge; an improvement not only in knowledge but also in wisdom; reconciliation with the universe; not cursing his/her fate but accepting it.

KEY ELEMENTS OF ARISTOTLE’S THEORY OF TRAGEDY

There are four key elements of Aristotle’s theory of tragedy. They are *hamartia*, *anagnorisis*, *peripeteia*, and *catharsis*. *Hamartia* is a “Greek word means error, a mistake in judgment committed by a tragic hero” (“What is Hamartia” 2003). “*Hamartia* is the character’s fatal flaw.” In other words, it is “an intellectual mistake or an error in judgment” (Watson, 2012). Golden’s translation supported that the term *hamartia* means miscalculation (Brown 2012). The protagonist in tragedy is not a perfectly good man nor yet a bad man; his misfortune is brought upon him not by vice and depravity but by some errors of judgment (Owensboro 2012). In McManus’ (1999) words, the protagonist brings his/her own downfall, not because he/she is sinful or morally weak, but because he/she does not know enough. According to Perrine (1974):

The hero’s downfall is his own fault, the result of his own free choice, not the result of pure accident

or villainy. Accident, villainy or fate may contribute to the downfall but only as cooperating agents: they are not alone responsible. The combination of the hero's greatness and his responsibility for his own downfall describes his downfall as tragic rather than as merely pathetic (Perrine 1974).

Anagnorisis means a recognition or discovery. It is "the gaining of the essential knowledge that was previously lacking" (McManus, 1999). Further, Kennedy (1979: 943) states that "Recognition or discovery (*anagnorisis*) is the revelation of some fact not known before, or some person's true identity".

Cooper (1997: 39) remarks that "a *peripeteia* occurs when the course of events takes a turn to the opposite in the way described" (p. 39). According to Kennedy (1979: 943) reversal or *peripeteia* is an "action that turns out to have the opposite effect from the effect its doer had intended". "*Peripeteia* occurs when a situation seems to be developing in one direction, then suddenly reverses to another" ("Aristotle on Tragedy"). Reversal is "a series of incidents or a train of action tending to bring about a certain end but resulting in something wholly different" (Hibbard, 1954: 170). The fortune's change experienced by hero is different from the expectations of the audience ("Vocabulario Especializado").

According to Paredes, *catharsis* is purification of plot events, so that the central character's errors become cleansed by his or her recognitions and suffering. Through a course of events involving pity and fear, the purification of those painful or fatal acts, pity and fear, it achieves the purgation. *Catharsis* is also the purging of the emotions of pity and fear that are aroused in the viewer of a tragedy. Therefore, it is related to the psychology of the spectator, the public is purged of its fear and

pity. *Catharsis* is the purging or cleansing of pity and fear from the viewers as they observe the action; in this way tragedy relieves them of harmful emotions, leaving them better people for their experience. Brown says that “*catharsis* helps to explain how an audience experiences satisfaction even from an unhappy ending” story. *Catharsis* is the positive social function of tragedy. It purifies the audience's feelings of pity and fear so that in real life we understand better whether we should feel them. Further, Watson argues that *catharsis* purges pity and fear so that we can face life with less of these emotions or more control over them.

THE HAMARTIA IN LEMONY SNICKET’S A SERIES OF UNFORTUNATE EVENTS

The first *hamartia* is in Mr. Poe’s car when the Baudelaire’s children accept Mr. Poe’s decision to send them living with Count Olaf although they are really doubt about Olaf. Second, when the Baudelaires meet Justice Strauss in front of her beautiful house, they think that she lives with Count Olaf there. However, she is actually Olaf’s neighbor whose house is across Olaf’s. The children have lack of knowledge about the real Olaf’s house so that they expect and hope for the wrong person and the wrong place. Third, the Baudelaires look at Olaf’s horrible house which condition is so different from Justice Strauss’. They do not reject to live there and do not refuse to meet Count Olaf who is weird like his house. The fourth *hamartia* happens in the bedroom. Klaus feels unfairness and blames his parents for everything awful happen to him and his sisters. It is not his parents’ fault; maybe somehow they have good plans for Violet, Klaus, and Sunny, if only he realizes it as what Violet does. Fifth, when Mr. Poe arrives in the time Olaf tries to kill the Baudelaires in a train

crash, the children do not tell everything to Mr. Poe. They do not assure him and do not show him the time schedule. They tend to keep silent.

Sixth, Violet and Klaus do not reveal the actual occurrence about the knife to Uncle Monty when Olaf disguises as Stephano. Here Violet and Klaus should make themselves defensible and assure their uncle that Stephano is Count Olaf who wants to take over the Baudelaire's fortune. Stephano or Count Olaf should not get in the house; he should not stay at Uncle Monty's home. Seventh, in the night Uncle Monty asks the Baudelaires to go to bed early, they just do what he asks them to do without any meaningful objection. The Baudelaires should have revealed Stephano's true identity at this moment. Eighth, in the night Uncle Monty's death, the Baudelaires should go out from their room to somehow save their beloved uncle from Olaf's wicked plan.

Ninth, in the case of Uncle Monty's death, the Violet and Klaus should convince Mr. Poe and the sheriff about the truth of Count Olaf and the Incredibly Deadly Viper. When Olaf and his assistant bring Violet and Klaus out, Violet and Klaus could escape themselves from Olaf's grip by struggling to get loose. Next, when Sunny screams to show how friendly the Incredibly Deadly Viper is, all people are surprised and look at Sunny. Klaus and Violet should be careful and aware of the possibility that Olaf can run away. At this time, they should hold Olaf and his assistant tightly. Tenth, the Baudelaires are not careful enough and do not pay a lot of attention to their surroundings. When the children and Mr. Poe cross Lake Lachrymose to reach Aunt Jo's house using a great raft, they do not realize that the raft rider is Olaf who is in disguise (again).

Eleventh, when the Baudelaires and Aunt Jo meet Captain Sham (disguised Olaf) in the market, Captain Sham

seduces Aunt Jo so that she plans to take him home. Aunt Jo orders the children to stay in the market and continue shopping, and they do their aunt's order. The Baudelaires should have stopped shopping and followed her aunt. They should have left their aunt with Captain Sham only. The Baudelaires commit great *hamartia*, indirectly letting Captain Sham endanger their aunt. The twelfth *hamartia* happens in the middle of Lake Lachrymose. The Baudelaires leave Aunt Jo alone in the boat, do not hold her hand tightly or pull her to Olaf's boat. If only they did it, they could save Aunt Jo from the death which Olaf deliberately does to her (letting her attacked by the Lachrymose leeches). Thirteenth, Violet feels despair and plans to approve Olaf's willing to marry her. Klaus ensures her that there is a solution for this problem, but Violet does not think so. She gives up the struggle and the fight.

THE ANAGNORISIS IN LEMONY SNICKET'S A SERIES OF UNFORTUNATE EVENTS

The first *anagnorisis* is the children know from Justice Strauss that Count Olaf is her neighbour, not her husband. Later, they know the real Olaf's house. Second, the Baudelaires understand enough that Olaf is an unfriendly and a rough man through his statements, most of which are about the Baudelaire's fortune. He hides something bad and wicked in him. Third, Klaus' dislike towards Sunny is shown while he is watching his parents taking care of Sunny. Later, he and his little sister are so close each other as if there is none can separate them. He realizes that the first impressions are often entirely wrong. Fourth, in the time the Baudelaires serve Pasta Puttanesca to Olaf and his troupe in the dining room, the children realize that Olaf wants to take over their fortune. It is revealed by his words. Fifth, Klaus feels angry towards his

parents. He thinks they do not have any plan for his future life and his sisters'. Violet reminds her brother not to think wrongly about their parents who died suddenly in the accident. She realizes that it is not her parents' fault.

Sixth, the Baudelaires know that the room which Olaf provides for them is uncomfortable to sleep in. A small sanctuary is successfully built due to Violet's ability to create something. It is a place where they can sleep in and can feel comfortable for a moment. Indeed, in their hearts they know that the troubling world lay just outside. Seventh, when Count Olaf confines the children in his car right in the middle of railway, they understand that Olaf wants to kill them in a train crash. Eighth, when the children start to live with Uncle Monty, Olaf comes in disguise as Stephano, the new assistant for herpetology of Uncle Monty. Klaus and Violet who open the door point him up as Count Olaf. Ninth, when Klaus and Violet bring Stephano's luggage upstairs, Klaus discusses his knowledge about Uncle Monty's spyglass with Violet. He knows that there is something to reveal.

The tenth *anagnorisis* is got by Klaus and Violet. They discover that they can send a message even from an unpredictable object before. They write the term 'imposter' in Petunia's body and send it to Uncle Monty who is talking to Stephano in the reptile room. Eleventh, when the Baudelaires are in Aunt Josephine's house, they look at the photo album. When Klaus asks her some questions, Aunt Jo feels upset and quickly grabs the photo album from Violet's hands. Aunt Jo does not want to tell the truth to the children. However, all those questions are still in Klaus' head and he realizes that probably the answers for most of his questions are summed up just in one term 'yes'. Twelfth, in the suicide note, Klaus discovers something wrong in his aunt's writing especially the

grammar and spelling. He suspects that the suicide note is not really written by Aunt Jo because she would not make all those mistakes. Thirteenth, Klaus realizes that it is a message instead of a merely suicide note. He figures it up by correcting all mistakes in Aunt Jo's note until he gets two words: Curdled Cave. He understands that Aunt Jo is not dead; she is hiding in that cave.

Fourteenth, in the time the storm starts to devastate Aunt Jo's house, Ike's room is in half-destroyed. Klaus and Violet can see what is in Ike's room. There are newspaper articles about fire and photos of places on fire. Klaus notices that Ike was investigating fires when he was alive. In this room, Klaus also gets a picture of an eye within a pentagon. The fifteenth *anagnorisis* happens in the middle of Lake Lachrymose. Klaus asks Aunt Jo about the eye picture but she does not tell the children explicitly. She states that there are good people and bad people in the world; the ones who start the fire and the ones who put them out. From her further words, the Baudelaire's children catch the fact that indirectly their parents died because they investigated fires intensively. Sixteenth, when Count Olaf finds the Baudelaire's and their aunt in Lake Lachrymose, he says that nobody is going to believe a dead woman. From this utterance, the Baudelaire's get the point that Olaf will let Aunt Jo die in the middle of Lake Lachrymose.

Seventeenth, Olaf arranges a play entitled 'The Marvelous Marriage' in which Violet and he, who are the leads, will get married. Violet and Klaus realize later that this marriage is for real. Eighteenth, when Violet tries to reject the marriage, her brother and she discover that Sunny is captive on the top of the tower. Sunny will be in danger if Violet does not agree to the marriage. Nineteenth, when Klaus tries to rescue Sunny, he finds a broken umbrella outside of tower. He

understands that he can use it to somehow climb the tower to reach the top of it. Violet who is on the stage, knows Klaus' existence. She plans to waste Olaf's time in signing the marriage certificate. Twentieth, in the time Klaus reaches the tower top and Sunny shows the eye behind, he picks up the eye picture from his pocket. When the sunlight comes in through the ventilators, shining brightly right towards the eye, Klaus realizes that the eye just points to his house. He realizes that the incident of his destroyed-house which killed his parents was not an incident but Olaf's deed. The last *anagnorisis* is got by Klaus. He prepares the eye and burns the marriage certificate using the complex light-focusing apparatus.

THE PERIPETEIA IN LEMONY SNICKET'S A SERIES OF UNFORTUNATE EVENTS

There are two *peripeteia* in this movie. First, the narrator of the movie states that the Baudelaire's children went to Peru, and together had wonderful adventures with their loving and wonderful guardian, Uncle Monty. He also indicates that the story ends. However, in the next seconds, the narrator tells that those are the words he desperately could type. He would give anything to say that the story ends here. Nevertheless, his mission is not to weave happy endings. He must confess that the Baudelaires' troubles have only just begun (Silberling, 2004). This is the turning point. It "occurs when a situation seems to developing in one direction, and then suddenly reverses to another." ("Aristotle on Tragedy").

The second *peripeteia* happens in nearly the end of the movie. Mr. Poe and all audiences who come in Count Olaf's play notice his villainy and arrest him. The narrator here says that "Count Olaf was captured, that Olaf be made to suffer

every hardship” which he gives to the Baudelaires (Silberling, 2004). The Baudelaire’s children have triumphed, a word which means, ‘unmasking a cruel and less talented arsonist and solving the mystery of the Baudelaire fire.’ In the further seconds, the narrator explains that “Count Olaf vanished after a jury of his peers overturned his sentence. As for the Baudelaires, what lay ahead for them was unclear.” In this scene, Mr. Poe just assures the children that the authorities will catch up with Olaf very soon (Silberling 2004).

CATHARSIS IN LEMONY SNICKET’S A SERIES OF UNFORTUNATE EVENTS

In the scene when the Baudelaires are confined in their bedroom, the children build a small sanctuary made of a tent, silhouette of their parents, and a flashlight. The next scene shows the time when they are trapped in Olaf’s car in the middle of railway. The children switch the track using the track switcher to avoid the train crashing the car. Another fortune of the children is that the storm does not also destroy the floor layer so that the Baudelaires do not fall into Lake Lachrymose. In addition, when the children are safe from damaged house, they cross the Lake Lachrymose to Curdled Cave. At this rare moment, they are happy because they can stay away from Count Olaf. These fortunes have role as *catharsis* which relieves the feelings of pity, sadness, and despair both for the Baudelaires (as the main characters) and for the viewers of this tragedy.

When the Baudelaire’s children visit their destroyed house once again, they receive a letter from their parents, which is called as the letter that never comes. In the same envelope, Klaus finds a golden spyglass, as same as each member of the club has. This spyglass plus the letter give the

children purgation of their pity and fear towards the lives they left behind and also towards their unclear lives ahead. And to complete catharsis for the audiences, the narrator gives long final statements which can make the viewers also feel that the Baudelaires are fortunate, indeed.

THE INFLUENCE OF TRAGIC ELEMENTS TO THE STORY OF LEMONY SNICKET'S A SERIES OF UNFORTUNATE EVENTS

Lemony Snicket's A Series of Unfortunate Events is a kind of black comedy movies. As people know, a comedy shows a lot of funny moments that make people laugh. "Comedy is an imitation of characters of a lower type. It consists in some defect or ugliness which is not painful or destructive." (Butcher). Although black comedy is sub-genre of comedy, there is a difference between them. According to Dixon, black comedy is "a type of comedy that makes things which you would not usually laugh at funny." "It often utilizes shock value to get laughs and common include death, violence, insanity, racism and other things that are usually not seen as funny." ("Black Comedy" 2010).

Comedy consists in ugliness which is not painful or destructive. Meanwhile, black comedy often utilizes shock value and themes such as death, violence, insanity, or racism which mostly imply pain. This is why black comedy is little bit different from comedy. The black comedy features in *Lemony Snicket's A Series of Unfortunate Events* are the peculiar habit of Sunny Baudelaire who tends to bite, all Olaf's possession, behaviours, gestures, facial expressions, and his madness; the Incredibly Deadly Viper; and Aunt Josephine's anxiety.

Lemony Snicket's A Series of Unfortunate Events movie is not pure comedy. It can also be defined as both drama and black comedy. Comedy consists of ugliness which is not painful or destructive. Black comedy often utilizes shock value and themes which mostly imply pain and often destruction. The terms 'pain' and 'destruction' here can be connected to tragedy because "tragedy causes the emotions of pity and fear in the hearts of all men" (Hibbard, 1954: 169). Pity and fear imply pain and usually these emotions are destructive. The title of this movie itself implies that this movie has an unhappy story. The existences of *hamartia*, *anagnorisis*, *peripeteia*, and *catharsis* make *Lemony Snicket's A Series of Unfortunate Events* can be viewed as a tragedy. Further, there are features of tragedy which can be found. They are the Baudelaire's destroyed home, the uncomfortable bedroom, the list of works to do in Olaf's house, Olaf slaps Klaus in the dining room, Klaus misses his home, the death of Uncle Monty, and the sadness in the place to visit before leaving. The *hamartia*, *anagnorisis*, *peripeteia*, and *catharsis* as the key elements of Aristotle's theory of tragedy really have great extent in affecting the story of this movie.

CONCLUSION

Tragedy is Aristotle's famous theory. In a tragedy a tragic hero suffers due to *hamartia* and then knowledge comes of ignorance followed by a reversal in fortune with a feeling of purification in the character. *Hamartia* (error in judgment), *anagnorisis* (recognition), *peripeteia* (reversal), and *catharsis* (purification) are the key elements in Aristotle's theory of tragedy. These tragedy elements can be found in *Lemony Snicket's A Series of Unfortunate Events*. The genre of this

movie is drama or black comedy. Some scenes in the movie show the existence of black comedy features.

This movie can also be considered as a tragedy instead of merely drama or black comedy because from the beginning to the end of this movie, there are many *hamartia* and *anagnorisis*. Also, there are *peripeteia* and *catharsis* which complete the existence of key elements of tragedy theory. *Hamartia* by *hamartia* is done by the tragic heroes (the Baudelaire's children) during the movie. They are indicated through judgment or actions that the Baudelaires have or do without knowing that actually those judgment and actions are erroneous. Next, the Baudelaires get knowledge that was previously lacking. *Anagnorisis* in this movie exists in a large amount, making the children discover some facts not known before. Further, there are only two *peripeteias* or reversals in this movie, yet they have powerful role in reinforcing the tragedy elements. In addition, the existence of *catharsis* in *Lemony Snicket's A Series of Unfortunate Events* makes this movie can be called as tragedy.

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