

The gladiator is a popular film with a wide audience. People will often say to me when I tell them it is a film I teach that they “love that film”. Then they go on to say that why would I select such a good movie to ‘ruin’ for my class.

I do not believe that Gladiator is the perfect tragedy. It does not fit seamlessly in with Aristotle’s ideas or even Horace’s theory for that matter. It does, however, manipulate the genre well and the mark of this is that it is such a popular film.

Maximus is a flawed character. He does not fit the role of ‘tragic hero’ perfectly but there are fundamental aspects present that mark him as one.

Hamartia: Maximus’ is blinded by his pride in ‘doing the right thing’. His error of judgement comes from the fact that he cannot see past the rage he feels towards Commodus to a path where he could ensure justice for the empire of Rome. Many people in his situation would simply ‘let it go’ or look to bring Commodus down from within however Maximus’ unbending moral compass makes this impossible.

Because Scott has set the character up so well from the beginning of the film, this display of moral fibre positions the viewer to see Maximus as more than the common man. He has something many men do not and we admire him for this as we fear for his safety. This is the first step towards a cathartic experience: the fear we feel for the hero. We know that nothing good can come from someone being so unwilling to ‘break the rules’. When does the perfectly good guy ever actually come out on top?

Peripeteia: The reversal is evident following Maximus’ defiance towards the new Emperor. He is arrested and sentenced to death (along with his family). Scott illustrates the reversal of fortune via the same means that Shakespeare does: Maximus loses his magnificent presence, communicated via his costume, the animal motifs that surround him and his ability to speak eloquently. As he loses his family and home, he loses his majestic identity as the leading general of Rome. Scott does something with the reversal of fortune and he continually offers us hope that Maximus is about to climb out of the pit he is in. More on this when we discuss Catharsis.

Anagnorisis : this one is a little trickier to pin down and its not a realisation in the traditional sense of the word. I believe that Maximus realises all along that the death of his family is because of him and for this reason, he appears to just give up. There is a moment though, following a conversation with Proximo and Juba, he has this realisation that he actually can get revenge. Revenge is one of the markers of the Roman style of tragedy and for a while, this revenge consumes Maximus- it is all he thinks about. There is another moment though, following the first fight in the Colosseum, when he realises that he can bring justice to the entirety of Rome. If he didn't understand this, he would have killed Commodus on the spot. He begins to understand that he can do more than rid Rome of a ill leader- he has the power to restore it to a senate ruled nation. This, in conjunction with the need for vengeance, becomes his driving focus for the rest of the film. He begins to see that his personal vendetta is not the 'big picture'. He works for the greater good.

The suffering: Unlike Lear, who experiences the horrible fate of watching his family die at the end, Maximus experiences this in the exposition. This is a deliberate move on Scott's part to ensure the audience is completely won over by the hero. While we recognize that he has made a mistake, we also know that he does not deserve the fate that has been handed to him and we feel pity for him earlier on than we do for Lear. In addition to this long term suffering, Maximus does not deserve to die for what he did. A blinding moral compass is not a just reason for death. And yet, like so many tragic heroes, he is killed. One of the differences here is that we, the viewer, have been encouraged all along to believe that this is a reward, not a punishment, by the continued visits into the afterlife. We know that Maximus' faith dictates that his family will be there, waiting for him so while we are sad that he is dying, we also feel relief for him, that he is getting what he originally wanted. Now, you could make a case that this is the same in Lear but we are not encouraged to think this way unless we delve into the religious beliefs of the time.

Is there a catharsis? Perhaps not in the traditional sense of the word. There is no "one" moment and this is what I believe makes it all the more powerful. There are so many times throughout the film that we are encouraged to feel afraid for Maximus, where we feel sorry for him and

there are many many times when we feel hopeful that he will claw his way back to his original position of power. We do feel a multitude of emotions at the end which are definitely a variation on the traditional meaning of catharsis. We can accept that catharsis is the purgation of emotions. Well there are definitely emotions at the end of Gladiator. We feel many things for the hero- relief, joy, sadness, anger, disappointment. The complicated feelings of joy and disappointment might be the strongest- we are gutted he is dying, he does not (the tragic hero never does) deserve to die and we feel he still has Rome to protect but at the same time, this is his ultimate wish. He believes, as we have been reminded via the flashes of the afterlife, that his family is waiting for him. We are, therefore, happy for him at the same time. It is definitely a release, just of many more layers than we possibly experienced with Lear.

Bronson has mentioned that Maximus is vanilla and it is a phrase I haven't heard before but it really got me thinking. Aristotle wanted the characters to be secondary to the plot. He believed that people should invest in the plot rather than the character. That the storyline itself should be the main device of the text. Now, we could really have any character in this story and the sentiment would remain true- someone refuses to bend the knee to a ruler they don't believe in, they pay the price for speaking out against them, fall from their position of power and for a time, try to fight their way back to it. Inevitably though, they cannot make it. Good does not always concur evil and sometimes, the best of us must die to make progress on the cause.

How does it appeal to us/get more of an emotional reaction than Lear or Oedipus? - Modern values and a storyline we can recognise easily- a man fighting for the good of the people rather than a man caught up inside his own world. Maximus suffers because he believes what he is doing is for 'the greater good'- a sentiment we value as a society. We love a martyr- someone who's images we can rally behind and fight for a good cause. Maximus has these qualities- he dies fighting for what he believed in, just in the same sense that Martin Luther King Jr. did.

It reveals the danger of being too virtuous, acting as a warning that there is

always a consequence for our actions- even if they are 'good'.

Again, Maximus experiences pride but it is around a common point : the legacy of life and the memory of man. None of us want to be gone and not remembered. There is so much pressure to do something different with our lives, something worth remembering. The reality is, it is rare to transcend time and be remembered for something you have done. **Discussion point: name those who are remembered for something following their death.** So why are we, as a society, preoccupied by this idea? Why can we not be content to be happy within ourselves during the course of our own lives?

His need for vengeance is easily recognisable to the audience who are encouraged to see his quest against Commodus as banking the scales. Justice is a concept that you learn from a young age and when it fails to be delivered, even a young child will go into an uproar- "that's not fair" was a common phrase in our house when one sister went unpunished for something they did to the other. Justice is a basic human need. It often motivates us to do or be something. It can turn a nation to chaos or restore the balance. It is so vital that people go to war to secure it. So, we admire Maximus and his dedication to ensuring he gets justice for his family because that is what we all crave, for one thing or another.

Scott manipulates the genre- reminds us via the 'dream flashes' what drives Maximus etc. to position the audience behind Maximus, to recognise his virtue as his failing and to encourage the reflection of the light and dark sides of human nature. Should there be a balance of both inside a single person? Is there value in 'playing the game' if the intention is pure?

Discussion point.

There is no black and white in the world. We cannot judge everyone by the same rope. Everyone has a vice and the consequences of our actions always extend beyond ourselves. We must look to be the best that we can and also accept that we cannot always be perfect.

Questions

Comments

Discussion