

ELEMENTS OF SHAKESPEAREAN TRAGEDY IN COMIC SERIES “DEATH NOTE”

Lika Silvia Batubara

Department of Computer Engineering, Politeknik Unggulan Cipta Mandiri, Indonesia
lika@ucmcampus.ac.id

Abstract

Death Note is one of popular manga (comic) and anime series in Japan. This comic series was created by Tsugumi Ohba and Takeshi Obata. The main character, Light Yagami, is a high school student who discovers a black supernatural notebook. It simply titled “Death Note”. The death note grants user the ability to kill someone with the knowledge of the victim’s name and face by writing the victim's name while remembering his or her face. The series centers around Light Yagami’s attempt to create and rule a world “cleansed of evil” as a “God” using the death note. Death Note is full of symbolism from Roman overtones to literary masterpieces (Macbeth, Hamlet and Othello). Same with Macbeth, Light Yagami’s tragic flaw is also caused by his obsession with power. The power of the death note awakens great ambitions and leads him to murder and insanity protect what he has claimed. He should face a horrible death that is fitting to the way he lives. This is the basic premise of William Shakespeare’s tragedy and it is also the heart of Death Note. Furthermore, the main aim of this paper was to acknowledge to the readers the elements of Shakespearean tragedy in the anime Death Note.

Keywords: Shakespearean tragedy in Death Note, Shakespeare’s tragic hero, tragedy in Death Note

INTRODUCTION

Death Note is the greatest psychological thriller comic and comic that has been created by Tsugumi Ohba and Takeshi Obata. It has been filmed in two live action Japanese movies released in 2006. Besides, it also has been printed in a form of novel in two different titles; Death Note another Note: BB Murder Cases and L Change the World. Death Note plays out like Shakespearean tragedy where the protagonist’s hubris proves to be his undoing.

The story of the comic focuses on a high school student, Light Yagami, who is both intellectually brilliant and unchallenged in his school life. In his boredom, he finds a strange black notebook simply titled “Death Note”. The notebook is a perfect murder weapon belonging to a bored Shinigami (Death God) named Ryuk who dropped it to earth seeking some amusement. The owner of any name written inside it dies in 40 seconds without fail in the condition you should remembering the name’s face. The power of the notebook awakens his great ambition to create a new world “without evil” as the God. This ambition leads him to his fatal flaw. The entire story of it has some elements of Shakespearean tragedy especially in his tragic hero.

According to Aristotle that the hero’s downfall is his own fault as a result of his own free choice, but misfortune is not wholly deserved. Usually, Death Note is the

greatest psychological thriller comic and comic that has been created by Tsugumi Ohba and Takeshi Obata. It has been filmed in two live action Japanese movies released in 2006. Besides, it also has been printed in a form of novel in two different titles; Death Note another Note: BB Murder Cases and L Change the World. Death Note plays out like Shakespearean tragedy where the protagonist's hubris proves to be his undoing.

The story of the comic focuses on a high school student, Light Yagami, who is both intellectually brilliant and unchallenged in his school life. In his boredom, he finds a strange black notebook simply titled "Death Note". The notebook is a perfect murder weapon belonging to a bored Shinigami (Death God) named Ryuk who dropped it to earth seeking some amusement. The owner of any name written inside it dies in 40 seconds without fail in the condition you should remembering the name's face. The power of the notebook awakens his great ambition to create a new world "without evil" as the God. This ambition leads him to his fatal flaw. The entire story of it has some elements of Shakespearean tragedy especially in his tragic hero.

According to Aristotle that the hero's downfall is his own fault as a result of his own free choice, but misfortune is not wholly deserved. Usually, his death is seen as a waste of human potential. His death usually is not a pure loss, because it results in greater knowledge and awareness.

William Shakespeare's works have created such beautiful pieces of literature in the form of tragedies. There are some elements that make the play a complete form of Shakespearean tragedy. A. C. Bradley. Shakespeare's tragedies generally follow the demands of Aristotelian view of tragic hero, though Shakespeare does bend some Aristotelian "rules" when he believes it is necessary to accomplish his purpose.

An examination of several of his tragedies will show how he achieves his dramatic effect in terms of his definition of tragic hero (Bradley, 1969). Most of tragedies written by Shakespeare are revenge and ambition tragedies (Motkar, 2013). The belief in ghosts and witches remained widespread in Elizabethan England. Shakespeare may not have believed in the supernatural, but he was certainly aware that such beliefs were held by many and used the element of supernatural to dramatic ends in many of his tragedies (Shopia, 2012).

This article provides everyone with information about the elements of Shakespearean tragedy in the comic series Death Note and the way how the protagonist in Death Note falls into a tragic hero.

RESEARCH METHOD

This article itself uses a qualitative research approach, which is an approach used to process data without using a count of numbers (statistics). This qualitative writing framework conveys data in narrative, either in the form of people's words or quotations, texts, or other discourse. In line with the previous statement, Bogdan and Biklen, as quoted by Sugiono, also argue that qualitative research is a descriptive research in which

the data are collected in the form of words or pictures, not a number. Thus, the primary data in this article is the comic series Death Note. While secondary data is data obtained from other references such as magazines, books, encyclopedias and so on. Since the object of this article is a comic, so it will carefully pay attention to all the contents contained in the comic, whether it's words, scenes, body movements, and terms used. so that it can be seen whether there are elements of Shakespearean tragedy in the story and how the main character can become a tragic hero.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

In the comic series “Death Note”, there are some elements of Shakespearean tragedy that can be found, especially tragic hero. Aristotle states that there are some characteristics of tragic hero such as he is a man of a noble stature or he is not an ordinary man, the tragic hero possesses tragic flaw or hamartia, he makes an error in judgement or tragic error. At the end of the play there is a reversal or catastrophe which initiates the denouement of falling action of the play and the audience goes to catharsis.

The protagonist in the comic series, Light Yagami, is very intelligent high school student. He is the smartest student in Japan. He is completely idealized as a golden boy who has managed to succeed in his every urban landscape; intelligent, accomplished, confident and hot. He also extremely adepts at reading social situation and people. It is clear that he is not an ordinary man. While he is not the usual tragic hero, he is still fit the bill. In high school setting, he is much respected. As the story progresses, he gets more respect by working on Kira case with L (a greatest mysterious detective in the world). Throughout the series he gains more and more respect which in turn sets up his fall.

In the beginning of the series Light Yagami who found a strange black notebook simply titled “Death Note” finally realizes that the death note has a power to kill people. Light then decides to cleanse the world by killing criminals and creates utopia with himself as the “God” of his new world. His obsession to become a “God” is his fatal flaw. Light’s pride becomes higher when he succeeds in manipulating his enemies. He thinks that he has removed all of his obstacle to become “God”. Because of his superiority, Light underestimates his rivals. He believes that he cannot be defeated. His firm belief that he is never wrong causes his fatal flaw. He makes further error in judgements which lead him to committing the deed which begins his downfall. Light’s tragic error is making a decision to kill the criminals by using the death note.

Light has several traits that could be considered to be tragic flaw because they all lead towards his fall. First is his ambition to become the God (refer to Death Note, volume 1 page 49). His desire to become a God leads him to using the death note’s power which becomes his fatal flaw. the second trait that could be considered a tragic flaw is his pride. Light’s pride becomes higher when he succeeds in manipulating everyone and even another Shinigami (death god in Japanese belief) named Rem. Light thinks that he has removed all of his obstacles to become a “God, until he should face L’s successors, Near

and Mello. But because his superiority, Light underestimates them (refer to Death Note, volume 8 page 67). Near is not as brilliant as L. Mello is far more reckless than Near and a lot of more impulsive. Light believes that they cannot defeat him. His firm belief that he is never wrong causes his fatal flaw. He makes further error in judgments which leads Near to reveal him as Kira (a mysterious mass murderer) which leads his downfall.

Light's defenses are strong and impenetrable. But unexpectedly, Near and Mello enter the picture, cracking up the solid defense Kira has built. Light's over confidence causes his catastrophe. His pride becomes his weakness. In the end of the story Light finally meets his tragic death. When he faced with death, he loses his mind and becomes insane. He pathetically asks to be saved (refer to Death Note, volume 12 page 220). Like Shakespeare's tragic hero, he responsible for the calamity for his fall.

The last trait is his ruthlessness. At the beginning of the series, Light decides that he would only kill criminals in order to make a better world but at the series progresses Light also kills everyone who gets in his way in making his new world including police and innocent people. Light's decision to use the death note in that manner causes his downfall. The center of the tragedy, therefore, lies in the action issuing from the character, flawed perception, and human frailty for which the hero is ultimately responsible. The hero recognizes his own responsibility for calamity too late to prevent his own death.

Snehal Morkar (2013) describes the characteristics of Shakespearean tragedy which she quotes from several literary writers. She makes her conclusion that there are some noticeable features in Shakespearean tragedy. One of them is tragic conflict. The action of the protagonist or tragic hero is most often motivated by external and internal conflicts, which leads to complications from which further conflicts arise-all in a kind of snowballing effect, driving the action toward tragic solution.

In Death Note, there are two main characters, Light Yagami and a mysterious detective known as L. Both Light and L are brilliant geniuses who seemingly not identical. The story of Death Note concentrates mostly on the cat-and-mouse game played by them. They have different idea or principle about justice. Light is the vigilante who is using the death note to bring justice to an evil world. On the other side, there is L, the world greatest detective who is determined in catching the world's biggest mass murderer. Both of the believe themselves on the side of justice, and the two match wits trying to show exactly which of them is good or evil (refer to Death Note, volume 1 page 168). Light has no qualms about manipulating people and killing anyone who gets in his way because he believes that his actions are justified. For Light, the death note is the key that will help him to build a better world. Light believes that he is the only human that could have purged the world of evil. He has the idea that he must have been destined to find the death note that Ryuk (Shinigami or death god) dropped in the beginning of the series. That is part of the reason that Light takes it upon himself to become God of new world that he will create (refer to Death Note, volume 1 page 49). With the death note,

he can perform divine justice by passing judgment on the wicked that is to kill every wicked and evil person on earth. The rest of world is definitely willing to follow him and even to worship him as their new God. Meanwhile L believes that murders that Light is committing are wrong and called it a “monstrous crime of mass murderer” that must be stopped at all costs. Even though winning the case is a matter of Pride to L, He truly believes that someone like Kira should not have the power of divine retribution.

Internal conflict can be seen in the first series of Death Note when Light Yagami first realizes that he has killed someone by using the death note, scared Light ducks under his bed trying to make decision. It is more like a wrestle with his moral conflict (refer to Death Note, volume 1 page 44). Murder is a prospect that terrifies Light as well. He realizes that he can in fact kill criminals by using the death note. He finds he has difficulty in committing murder. Light is constantly questioning his own self-worth and the borders of morality. He admits that the world is “a rotten mess” and needs to be cleaned up. He finally decides to use the death note to kill of the world’s criminals by giving them heart attacks and make the world into a better place where he will reign as ruler. Internal conflict is struggle between opposing needs, desires or emotion within a single character. The predominantly internal conflict in the mind of Shakespearean heroes is between desire and moral values.

Shakespeare also introduces the supernatural elements such as ghosts and witches who have supernatural knowledge. The supernatural elements cannot be explained away as an illusion in the mind of one character. It does contribute to the action, but it is always placed in the closest relation with the character. It gives confirmation and a distinct form to inward movements already present and exerting an influence: to half formed thought or the memory of guilt or suspicion. The supernatural elements in “Death Note” are the death note itself and its former owner, Ryuk, a Shinigami or Death God in Japanese belief.

Shakespeare occasionally represents abnormal conditions of mind: insanity, hallucinations, dreams etc., as the result of tragic flaw. They are never introduced as the origin of any deeds of any dramatic moment. The abnormal condition can be seen clearly in the last volume in the comic series “Death Note” when Light Yagami begins to face his death. After realizing that his plan has failed and his disguise as Kira (a mass murderer who wants to be a God by using death note) is revealed, Light pretty much snaps. Light is shot by Matsuda (a police) while he is trying to write Near’s name (a detective who continues L’s investigation about Kira) on a piece of death note kept in his watch. Light yells for Mikami (his confidant) to write down the names of everyone present but Mikami responds by asking how he is supposed to kill them with a fake death note. This brings Mikami’s realization that Light is not a God. Nevertheless, in the very moment, Light’s growing madness reaches its climax. Light becomes increasingly distraught, and begins asking for help from everyone who used to help him (refer to Death Note, volume 12 page 225).

In complete desperation, Light begs Ryuk (a Shinigami or Death God in Japanese belief) to help him and write the other's names in death note. As Ryuk begins to write, Light thinks he has won but Ryuk says that the name he has written is Light Yagami. Ryuk reminds Lights that he is on either side and fulfills his earlier promise to write Light's name in his death note. Light begins to panic, repeating in his head that he does not want to die. Light struggles to escape his fate only to finally killed by Ryuk and his death note. Light's final sight is a vision of L, his greatest rival (Death Note, volume 12 page 243). Light's remarkable intelligence only rivals his sinister motives. In addition, after Light's death, Ohba suggests that Light go back to the nothingness. It is the final proclamation from Ohba that Light is not God but only a human being, afraid of defeat and death just like everyone else. Therefore, it is true that the death note brings nothing but misfortune to the user because the power of a God can sometimes be too powerful for a mere human. Like another tragic story, the ending of the comic series Death Note makes the readers go to catharsis. It is because they feel pity to Light who actually has a bright future but should end in tragic way.

CONCLUSION

The entire storyline of Death Note is similar to Shakespeare's tragedies. The comic series Death Note is one which deals its own way with many philosophical questions. There is statement about good and evil. For the most part, the series deals with Light Yagami and his nature state of being. Light bears not only good faith intentions but also a strong desire to become godlike. At the beginning of the story, Light has very noble intentions about how to use the death note and his intelligence cannot be doubted, but as the story progresses Light's humanity is questioned.

The protagonist of Death Note and Shakespear's tragedy is a man of high standing who garners accolades, respect from those in higher stations and considers the epitome of success in his activities. At the height of his power when thinks it is not possible to reach everything more, he is given supernatural favor that carries the promise of immense power. This awakens great ambition and leads him to murder and insanity to protect and hold what he has claimed. This is the basic of premise of William Shakespeare's tragedies and it is also at the heart of Tsugumi Ohba's comic series Death Note.

Form conclusion above, it is recommended to the next researchers who are interested in analyzing the same data, Death Note, to analyze other aspects of the comic analysis such as characters, plot and theme. Moreover, it is suggested to further researchers to analyze the other aspects of the comic series like the duality of justice, divine rule, symbolism and moral complexity that can be found in the comic story. This article is also expected to be able to contribute to others who focus on the topic about Shakespearean tragedy.

REFERENCES

- A. C. Bradley. <http://www.pgdp.net/>
- Bradley, A. C. 1969. *Shakespearean Tragedy: Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth*. London:
- Butcher, Ralf and Thomas. 2002. *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art*. New Delhi: Kalyani Publisher. Edition. New York: Wadsworth Publishing Company, Inc. <http://liam-sensei.livejournal.com/28683.html>
- Laura. 2011. *Death Note: Shakespearean Tragedy*. <http://pogomonster.wordpress.com/2011/04/01/death->
- Liam. 2009. *The Rabble's Curse: Ambition and Supernatural Charms in Macbeth and Death Note*. Macmillan.
- Motkar, Snehal. 2013, *Characteristics of a Shakespearean Tragedy*. <http://www.tragedy.html> note-shakespearean-tragedy/
- Ohba, Tsugumi and Obata, Takeshi. 2003. *Death Note*. Jakarta. M&C!
- Roche, Mark W. 2006. *Introduction to Hegel's Theory of Tragedy*. PhaenEx
- Shell, Suzanne and Reigel, Lisa. 2005. *The Project Gutenberg EBook of Shakespearean Tragedy, by*
- Tilak, Raghukul. 2002. *History and Principles of Literary Criticism*. Delhi: Rama Brothers.
- Wrightsmen. Lawrence S and Sigelman, Carol K. 1961. *A Scientific Study of Human Behavior*. Fifth