The Suicidal Hero in Shakespeare’s Tragedies: 
*Hamlet, Macbeth, King Lear, Timon of Athens*, 
*Othello, Julius Caesar*

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Thesis Submitted in Partial fulfillment of the Requirements  
of the Degree of Master of Arts (Literature and Criticism)  
to Yarmouk University

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1998

ii
Abstract

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This thesis examines the presentation of suicide in six of Shakespeare’s tragedies: Hamlet, Macbeth, King Lear, Timon of Athens, Othello, and Julius Caesar. It explores the tragic hero’s inner struggle that culminates in suicide. The thesis also identifies and describes the various modes of suicide pervasive in Shakespeare’s tragedies through an investigation of his repeated dwelling on the theme of suicide.

The study is divided into an introduction, three chapters and a concluding chapter. In the Introduction, the researcher presents the major religious, social, and philosophical influences on the Renaissance English concept of suicide, and shows how Shakespeare was affected by the changing concept of suicide in fashioning his tragedies. Chapter 2, “The Nihilistic Suicide” deals with the intellectual aspect of the suicidal tendency in the tragic hero. Both Hamlet and Macbeth are compared regarding their suicidal tendencies. Since both view life from a nihilistic point of view, they are led to choose death as a refuge from a meaningless life. Chapter 3, “The Emotional Suicide” explores suicide on the emotional level in King Lear and Timon of Athens. The tragic hero in each play is suicidal due to his extreme...
emotional attitude which makes him go through a process of emotional isolation. The suicide which Lear and Timon commit is basically a result of the loss of the will to live. Chapter 4, "The Redemptive Suicide" deals with the issue of suicide as a mechanism to redeem the tragic hero from a heinous crime. In Othello and Julius Caesar, suicide reasserts the nobility of the tragic hero, and allows him to exit from the world of the play as he entered it, a noble and a dignified figure. The tragic path of Othello and Brutus is similar, and the suicide each commits is loaded with redemptive connotations.

In the concluding chapter, the researcher comes out of the study with the following conclusions: First, there are various patterns of suicide that exist repeatedly in Shakespeare's tragedies. Each pattern is evident in at least two plays. Second, the study shows that the suicide of the woman, who has a direct relationship with the hero, always comes before the suicide of the hero. The female suicide has a direct influence on the tragic hero's isolation and subsequent suicide. Third, in most of the plays discussed, the theme of suicide co-exists with its counter-argument that advocates clinging to life. This indicates that Shakespeare was aware of the different dimensions of suicide, and was not using it because of a personal acute depression and disillusionment with life. He was dramatic to his fingertips and could never have chosen the theme of suicide for personal reasons, whether conscious or unconscious, but because of the various dramatic effects that were associated with suicide as projected by the Age itself. Finally, the different patterns of suicide and the comprehensiveness with which Shakespeare treated the subject still contribute to widen the scope of his themes to the extent of universality.