**“Tragedy and the Common Man”**

***1949, The New York Times***

**An Essay by Arthur Miller**

In this age few tragedies are written. It has often been held that the lack is due to a

paucity of heroes among us, or else that modern man has had the blood drawn out

of his organs of belief by the skepticism of science, and the heroic attack on life

cannot feed on an attitude of reserve and circumspection. For one reason or another,

we are often held to be below tragedy—or tragedy above us. The inevitable

conclusion is, of course, that the tragic mode is archaic, fit only for the very highly

placed, the kings or the kingly, and where this admission is not made in so many

words it is most often implied.

I believe that the common man is as apt a subject for tragedy in its highest sense as

kings were. On the face of it this ought to be obvious in the light of modern

psychiatry, which bases its analysis upon classic formulations, such as the Oedipus

and Orestes complexes, for instance, which were enacted by royal beings, but which

apply to everyone in similar emotional situations.

More simply, when the question of tragedy in art in not at issue, we never hesitate

to attribute to the well-placed and the exalted the very same mental processes as

the lowly. And finally, if the exaltation of tragic action were truly a property of the

high-bred character alone, it is inconceivable that the mass of mankind should

cherish tragedy above all other forms, let alone be capable of understanding it.

As a general rule, to which there may be exceptions unknown to me, I think the

tragic feeling is evoked in us when we are in the presence of a character who is

ready to lay down his life, if need be, to secure one thing—his sense of personal

dignity. From Orestes to Hamlet, Medea to Macbeth, the underlying struggles that

of the individual attempting to gain his “rightful” position in his society.

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Sometimes he is one who has been displaced from it, sometimes one who seeks to

attain it for the first time, but the fateful wound from which the inevitable events

spiral is the wound of indignity, and its dominant force is indignation. Tragedy,

then, is the consequence of a man’s total compulsion to evaluate himself justly.

In the sense of having been initiated by the hero himself, the tale always reveals

what has been called his “tragic flaw,” a failing that is not peculiar to grand or

elevated characters. Nor is it necessarily a weakness. The flaw, or crack in the

character, is really nothing—and need be nothing, but his inherent unwillingness to

remain passive in the face of what he conceives to be a challenge to his dignity, his

image of his rightful status. Only the passive, only those who accept their lot

without active retaliation, are “flawless.” Most of us are in that category. But there

are among us today, as there always have been, those who act against the scheme of

things that degrades them, and in the process of action everything we have accepted

out of fear or insensitivity or ignorance is shaken before us and examined, and from

this total onslaught by an individual against the seemingly stable cosmos

surrounding us—from this total examination of the “unchangeable” environment—

comes the terror and the fear that is classically associated with tragedy.

More important, from this total questioning of what has previously been

unquestioned, we learn. And such a process is not beyond the common man. In

revolutions around the world, these past thirty years, he has demonstrated again

and again this inner dynamic of all tragedy.

Insistence upon the rank of the tragic hero, or the so-called nobility of his character,

is really but a clinging to the outward forms of tragedy. If rank or nobility of

character was indispensable, then it would follow that the problems of those with

rank were the particular problems of tragedy. But surely the right of one monarch

to capture the domain from another no longer raises our passions, nor are our

concepts of justice what they were to the mind of an Elizabethan king.

The quality in such plays that does shake us, however, derives from the underlying

fear of being displaced, the disaster inherent in being torn away from our chosen

image of what or who we are in this world. Among us today this fear is as strong,

and perhaps stronger, than it ever was. In fact, it is the common man who knows

this fear best.

Now, if it is true that tragedy is the consequence of a man’s total compulsion to

evaluate himself justly, his destruction in the attempt posits a wrong or an evil in

his environment. And this is precisely the morality of tragedy and its lesson. The

discovery of the moral law, which is what the enlightenment of tragedy consists of,

is not the discovery of some abstract or metaphysical quantity.

The tragic night is a condition of life, a condition in which the human personality is

able to flower and realize itself. The wrong is the condition which suppresses man,

perverts the flowing out of his love and creative instinct. Tragedy enlightens and it

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must, in that it points the heroic finger at the enemy of man’s freedom. The thrust

for freedom is the quality in tragedy which exalts. The revolutionary questioning of

the stable environment is what terrifies. In no way is the common man debarred

from such thoughts or such actions.

Seen in this light, our lack of tragedy may be partially accounted for by the turn

which modern literature has taken toward the purely psychiatric view of life, or the

purely sociological. If all our miseries, our indignities, are born and bred within our

minds, then all action, let alone the heroic action, is obviously impossible.

And if society alone is responsible for the cramping of our lives, then the protagonist

must needs be so pure and faultless as to force us to deny his validity as a

character. From neither of these views can tragedy derive, simply because neither

represents a balanced concept of life. Above all else, tragedy requires the finest

appreciation by the writer of cause and effect.

No tragedy can therefore come about when its author fears to question absolutely

everything, when he regards any institution, habit or custom as being either

everlasting, immutable or inevitable. In the tragic view the need of man to wholly

realize himself is the only fixed star, and whatever it is that hedges his nature and

lowers it is ripe for attack and examination. Which is not to say that tragedy must

preach revolution.

The Greeks could probe the very heavenly origin of their ways and return to confirm

the rightness of laws. And Job could face God in anger, demanding his right and

end in submission. But for a moment everything is in suspension, nothing is

accepted, and in this stretching and tearing apart of the cosmos, in the very action

of so doing, the character gains “size,” the tragic stature which is spuriously

attached to the royal or the high born in our minds. The commonest of men may

take on that stature to the extent of his willingness to throw all he has into the

contest, the battle to secure his rightful place in his world.

There is a misconception of tragedy with which I have been struck in review after

review, and in many conversations with writers and readers alike. It is the idea

that tragedy is of necessity allied to pessimism. Even the dictionary says nothing

more about the word than that it means a story with a sad or unhappy ending. This

impression is so firmly fixed that I almost hesitate to claim that in truth tragedy

implies more optimism in its author than does comedy, and that its final result

ought to be the reinforcement of the onlooker’s brightest opinions of the human

animal.

For, if it is true to say that in essence the tragic hero is intent upon claiming his

whole due as a personality, and if this struggle must be total and without

reservation, then it automatically demonstrates the indestructible will of man to

achieve his humanity. The possibility of victory must be there in tragedy. Where

pathos rules, where pathos is finally derived, a character has fought a battle he

could not possibly have won. The pathetic is achieved when the protagonist is, by

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virtue of his witlessness, his insensitivity or the very air he gives off, incapable of

grappling with a much superior force. Pathos truly is the mode for the pessimist.

But tragedy requires a nicer balance between what is possible and what is

impossible. And it is curious, although edifying, that the plays we revere, century

after century, are the tragedies. In them, and in them alone, lies the belief—

optimistic, if you will, in the perfectibility of man. It is time, I think, that we who

are without kings, took up this bright thread of our history and followed it to the

only place it can possible lead in our time—the heart and spirit of the average man.