

Tragedy and the Common Man

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 instances, which were enacted by royal beings, but which apply to everyone in similar emotional situations.

More simply, when the question of tragedy in art is 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

From *The New York Times*, February 27, 1949, Sec. 2, pp. 1, 3. The appearance of this essay followed closely upon the opening of *Death of a Salesman* at the Morosco Theatre on February 10, 1949. Copyright 1949 by Arthur Miller, Copyright © renewed 1977 by Arthur Miller.

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Be sure to read carefully the first two Arthur Miller chapters, the underlined parts of Aristotle's Poetics, and choose what you like of

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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 struggle is that of the individual attempting to gain his "rightful" position in his society.

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 and 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 right 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 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

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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 highborn 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 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 possibly lead in our time—the heart and spirit of the average man.

Arthur Miller was born and grew up in New York. His first play, *No Villain*, which he wrote in six days while on spring vacation from the University of Michigan, won the Hopwood Award in Drama for 1936. This was the first of many awards Miller was to receive for the plays which have placed him at the forefront of American Dramatists. These plays include *All My Sons*, *Death of a Salesman* (for which he was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1949), *The Crucible*, *A View from the Bridge*, *After the Fall*, *Incident at Vichy*, *The Price*, *The Creation of the World and Other Business*, and, most recently, *The Archbishop's Ceiling*, which premiered at the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in the spring of 1977. Mr. Miller and his wife, photographer Inge Morath, have collaborated on two nonfiction books. They live in Connecticut.

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does, I may do so melodramatically; but when I show why he almost did not do it, I am making drama.

Why is this higher? Because it more closely reflects the actual process of human action. It is quite possible to write a good melodrama without creating a single living character; in fact, melodrama becomes diffused wherever the vagaries and contradictions of real characterizations come into play. But without a living character it is not possible to create drama or tragedy. For as soon as one investigates not only why a man is acting, but what is trying to prevent him from acting—assuming one does so honestly—it becomes extremely difficult to contain the action in the forced and arbitrary form of melodrama.

Now, standing upon this element of drama we can try to reach toward tragedy. Tragedy, first of all, creates a certain order of feeling in the audience. The pathetic creates another order of feeling. Again, as with drama and melodrama, one is higher than the other. But while drama may be differentiated psychologically from melodrama—the higher entailing a conflict *within* each character—to separate tragedy from the mere pathetic is much more difficult. It is difficult because here society enters in.

Let me put it this way. When Mr. B., while walking down the street, is struck on the head by a falling piano, the newspapers call this a tragedy. In fact, of course, this is only the pathetic end of Mr. B. Not only because of the accidental nature of his death; that is elementary. It is pathetic because it merely arouses our feelings of sympathy, sadness, and possibly of identification. What the death of Mr. B. does not arouse is the tragic feeling.

To my mind the essential difference, and the precise difference, between tragedy and pathos is that tragedy brings us not only sadness, sympathy, identification and even fear; it also, unlike pathos, brings us knowledge or enlightenment.

But what sort of knowledge? In the largest sense, it is knowledge pertaining to the right way of living in the world. The manner of Mr. B.'s death was not such as to illustrate any principle of living. In short, there was no illumination of the ethical in it. And to put it all in the same breath, the reason we confuse

The Nature of Tragedy

by Arthur Miller

THERE are whole libraries of books dealing with the nature of tragedy. That the subject is capable of interesting so many writers over the centuries is part proof that the idea of tragedy is constantly changing, and more, that it will never be finally defined.

In our day, however, when there seems so little time or inclination to theorize at all, certain elemental misconceptions have taken hold of both critics and readers to a point where the word has often been reduced to an epithet. A more exact appreciation of what tragedy entails can lead us all to a finer understanding of plays in general, which in turn may raise the level of our theater.

The most common confusion is that which fails to discriminate between the tragic and the pathetic. Any story, to have validity on the stage, must entail conflict. Obviously the conflict must be between people. But such a conflict is of the lowest, most elementary order; this conflict purely *between* people is all that is needed for melodrama and naturally reaches its apogee in physical violence. In fact, this kind of conflict defines melodrama.

The next rung up the ladder is the story which is not only a conflict between people, but at the same time within the minds of the combatants. When I show you why a man does what he

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the tragic with the pathetic, as well as why we create so few tragedies, is twofold: in the first place many of our writers have given up trying to search out the right way of living, and secondly, there is not among us any commonly accepted faith in a way of life that will give us not only material gain but satisfaction.

Our modern literature has filled itself with an attitude which implies that despite suffering, nothing important can really be learned by man that might raise him to a happier condition. The probing of the soul has taken the path of behaviorism. By this method it is sufficient for an artist simply to spell out the anatomy of disaster. Man is regarded as essentially a dumb animal moving through a preconstructed maze toward his inevitable sleep.

Such a concept of man can never reach beyond pathos, for enlightenment is impossible within it, life being regarded as an immutably disastrous fact. Tragedy, called a more exalted kind of consciousness, is so called because it makes us aware of what the character might have been. But to say or strongly imply what a man might have been requires of the author a soundly based, completely believed vision of man's great possibilities. As Aristotle said, the poet is greater than the historian because he presents not only things as they were, but foreshadows what they might have been. We forsake literature when we are content to chronicle disaster.

Tragedy, therefore, is inseparable from a certain modest hope regarding the human animal. And it is the glimpse of this brighter possibility that raises sadness out of the pathetic toward the tragic.

But, again, to take up a sad story and discover the hope that may lie buried in it, requires a most complete grasp of the characters involved. For nothing is so destructive of reality in literature as thinly motivated optimism. It is my view—or my prejudice—that when a man is seen whole and round and so characterized, when he is allowed his life on the stage over and beyond the mould and purpose of the story, hope will show its face in his, just as it does, even so dimly, in life. As the old saying has it, there is some good in the worst of us. I think that the

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tragedian, supposedly the saddest of citizens, can never forget this fact, and must strive always to posit a world in which that good might have been allowed to express itself instead of succumbing to the evil. I began by saying that tragedy would probably never be wholly defined. I end by offering you a definition. It is not final for me, but at least it has the virtue of keeping mere pathos out.

You are witnessing a tragedy when the characters before you are wholly and intensely realized, to the degree that your belief in their reality is all but complete. The story in which they are involved is such as to force their complete personalities to be brought to bear upon the problem, to the degree that you are able to understand not only why they are ending in sadness, but how they might have avoided their end. The demeanor, so to speak, of the story is most serious—so serious that you have been brought to the state of outright fear for the people involved, as though for yourself.

And all this, not merely so that your senses shall have been stretched and your glands stimulated, but that you may come away with the knowledge that man, by reason of his intense effort and desire, which you have just seen demonstrated, is capable of flowering on this earth.

Tragedy arises when we are in the presence of a man who has missed accomplishing his joy. But the joy must be there, the promise of the right way of life must be there. Otherwise pathos reigns, and an endless, meaningless, and essentially untrue picture of man is created—man helpless under the falling piano, man wholly lost in a universe which by its very nature is too hostile to be mastered.

In a word, tragedy is the most accurately balanced portrayal of the human being in his struggle for happiness. That is why we revere our tragedies in the highest, because they most truly portray us. And that is why tragedy must not be diminished through confusion with other modes, for it is the most perfect means we have of showing us who and what we are, and what we must be—or should strive to become.

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ARISTOTLE'S POETICS

Summary

1-5. General introduction to poetry

1. Poetry, like the other arts, is a mode of imitation (mimesis). (The function of the poet or artist is to imitate, through media appropriate to the particular art, not particular historical events, characters, emotions, but the universal aspects of life (form, essence, idea) impressed on his mind by observation of real life. Poetry is an act of creation, for it imitates mental impressions; it is therefore an idealization, not a direct copy of human life. It is closer to reality than the concrete situation, since the universal is truer than the particular. All arts, e.g. poetry, music, differ from one another in 1) the media they employ; 2) the objects they imitate; 3) their manner of interpretation; 4) their proper function (end, purpose).

Media of imitation. (Greek) poetry employs language, rhythm, and harmony (music) It is not the use of meter that makes the poetry, but rather the element of imitation of the universal.

2. Objects of imitation. Human beings in action, their characters, acts, emotions. The persons imitated will be either higher than average (idealism), average (realism), lower than average (caricature). Tragedy imitates persons better than average, comedy those worse than average.
3. Manner of imitation. 1) completely indirect imitation, as in narrative; 2) partly indirect and partly direct, as in epic, which contains both narrative and speeches of character; 3) entirely direct action, as in the drama, where the entire incident is acted out before the audience. "Drama" means "action."
4. Psychology of artistic creation and enjoyment of art. Works of art are created because it is instinctive in man to imitate, and because of the human instinct for rhythm and harmony. People enjoy observing works of art for various reasons: 1) there is pleasure in seeing imitated certain things and events (e.g. murder, dead body, operation) which would be painful to observe in real life; 2) from art we often learn something new, and people take pleasure in learning; 3) if there is nothing new to be learned from the imitation, there can be pleasure in recognition of what we know; 4) There is pleasure in observing the technical perfection of a work of art.

5. . . . Comedy.
Epic vs. tragedy

6. Definition of tragedy: 1) objects: imitation of serious action, complete in itself so far as size is concerned; 2) media: rhythm, language, and melody (Greek tragedy is poetic drama, employing alternation of dialogue and choral odes); 3) manner: direct action, not narrative; 4) purpose: to arouse pity and fear and effect a pleasurable catharsis (purging) of these two emotions.

PERTINENT! Interpretation of "catharsis": 1) Plato rejects tragedy on the ground that it arouses pity and fear and makes men emotionally weak; Aristotle believes that tragedy purges away these emotions and makes men stronger;

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- 2) medical (or "vaccination") theory - pity and fear are often present in persons to excess; by applying more of the same there will be a pathological release which will be pleasant and benefit persons by restoring proper emotional balance; 3) vicarious experience theory - we take pleasure in experiencing the emotions involved in such a fictitious scene without being personally harmed; 4) sadistic theory - we enjoy seeing others suffer, and there is added pleasure because we know it is only a play, not real life; we feel superior to the characters who suffer; 5) we tend to identify ourselves (empathize) with one of the characters in the play; when the drama is over, we take pleasure both because it has not really happened, and because we realize that our own troubles are minor as compared with that which has happened in the tragedy.

Six elements of tragedy: 1) spectacle (scenery, costumes); 2) music; 3) diction; 4) characters; 5) thought; 6) plot. Order of importance of these elements: 1) plot (for tragedy is not mere character study, but a dynamic portrayal of life; good plot is necessary to produce the tragic effect of pity and fear) 2) character (must be subordinated to the action); 3) thought; 4) diction; 5) music; 6) spectacle. The last two are the least important, since the tragedy may be read.

7. Proper construction of plot. It must be completely whole, having a beginning, middle, and end. It must be neither too short nor too long, so that we may grasp both the separate parts and the unity of the whole in a single memory span. The natural limit in size is one that provides a change in the hero's fortunes with proper dramatic causation.
8. Unity of action (the only one of the "three unities" which Aristotle insists upon; the others are of time and place.) A unified plot does not consist of disconnected events about the same hero, but rather of organically unified events which all the parts are absolutely necessary and in perfect order.
9. Philosophical nature of poetry. The poet imitates not what actually happens, but what might happen, what is probable, and would befit a particular type of individual. The poet therefore imitates ideal truth, the universal and typical. Hence "poetry is something more philosophical and of graver import than history." Hence, too, plot, not verse form, is the heart of tragedy.
- The worst plot are episodic ones, in which the sequence of events has no dramatic causation, since they are neither probable nor necessary. The best plot is one that arouses pity and fear, in the most powerful manner, through incidents that are unexpected but necessary and probably and linked together in sequence by cause and effect.
10. Mechanism of the tragic plot: 1) simple plot - single continuous movement of events without reversal or discovery; 2) complex plot - in which a change in the hero's fortune is attended by reversal or discovery both.
11. Parts of plot.
- A. Reversal (peripety) - change that occurs when opposite of what was intended turns out.
 - B. Discovery (anagnorisis) - change from ignorance to knowledge, from love to hate, or vice versa. The best form of discovery is that which arouses pity and fear most, namely that associated with peripety, being necessary or probable, dramatically caused, effecting love or hate, involving reversal which brings unhappiness or misery.
 - C. Suffering @ murder, torture, injury, etc.

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12. Quantitative elements of tragedy: prologue, episode, exodos, parados, stasimon.

13. Ideal tragic character and plot.

→ A. Plot

1. Complex
2. Must arouse pity (what we feel when someone suffers more than he deserves for his faults and mistakes) and fear (what we feel when suffering happens to someone like ourselves.)

→ B. Character.

1. Must pass from happiness to misery (not the reverse).
2. Must not be perfectly virtuous and just.
3. His downfall must not result from vice or baseness.
4. His downfall must come about because of a flaw of character (tragic flaw) and error in judgement.
5. Must belong to distinguished family, so that the fall will be all the greater.

The simple unhappy ending is best in tragedy. The double ending, happiness for the good and unhappiness for the evil, is less desirable, and is a concession to popular taste.

- * 14. Methods of arousing pity and fear. It is not artistic to effect this by staging (as a story). The best means is through the incidents of the plot - when a murder or other horrible deed is about to be perpetrated by a person on a blood relative who is unknown to him and whose identity he discovers just in the nick of time.
- * 15. Character: There are four things to aim at: 1) good in performing the proper functions of that character; 2) true to type; 3) true to life; 4) consistent and unified throughout. All acts and words should be the probable or necessary outcome of the inner character. It is necessary to portray character flaws naturally, but the character as a whole must be made better than average (idealized).
- * 16. Types of discovery: There are six types of discovery: 1) by signs, tokens or marks on the person; 2) by arbitrary direct discoveries invented by the poet; 3) through awakened memory; 4) through logical reasoning; 5) through wrong sophistical reasoning which reaches the correct result; 6) discovery that grows in a probable manner out of the incidents themselves.
17. Practical hints for composition: 1) visualize the scenes as they would be when performed; 2) get outside yourself, feel the emotions personally; act out the story yourself (the poet must be a good actor and have a touch of madness in him; 3) first make an outline of the plot (universal form), then fill in the necessary episodes.
18. Complication and denouement. The complication is all that precedes the crisis, the change in the hero's fortune; the denouement (unravelling) is all that follows the crisis to the end of the drama.
- * There are four types of tragedy (viewed from the major emphasis): 1) complex; (involving peripety and discovery); 2) of suffering; 3) of character; 4) of spectacle. All four should be properly combined to achieve the best effect. Tragedy should not be too long or attempt to cover

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an epic story. The chorus should be an integral part of the play, almost one of the actors, and not perform mere unessential musical interludes.

19. General observations on thought and diction.

20. Diction - parts of speech

21. Types of words in poetry: from the point of view of structure, simple or complex; in meaning, ordinary; foreign, metaphor, ornamental; in form, coined, lengthened, shortened, altered (poetic)

22. Use of diction in poetry. There must be clarity without vulgarity, achieved by combination of the ordinary and the unfamiliar. It is bad to make excessive use of metaphors and foreign words, nor must the language be entirely prosaic. Moderation is necessary, otherwise the effect will be ludicrous. (The most important element is mastery of metaphor.)

23-24. Tragedy and epic compared.

25. Solutions of problems of literary criticism.

- A. The poet should not be expected to be scientifically correct. Apparent faults and impossibilities are permissible if they serve the ends of poetry and create a desired effect. They are not serious if the poet in describing something makes a technical error through ignorance.
- B. We must not attribute to the poet errors that he puts into the mouths of his characters, for such error may be true to the character's type.
- C. Our impression of an impossibility or error may be wrong, for the poet may be treating things ideally or realistically, or vice versa.
- D. As for language, it must be remembered that the poet is permitted greater license.
- E. We cannot criticize a supposed error, unless we know what the poet really intended.
- F. POETRY OFTEN DEALS WITH PROBABLE IMPOSSIBILITIES.

Aeschylus (525-456 B.C.)

Sophocles (ca. 479-405 B.C.)

Euripides (480-406 B.C.)

Aristophanes (ca. 446-385 B.C.)

Socrates (469-399 B.C.)

Plato (428/7-348/7 B.C.)

Aristotle (384-322 B.C.)

Nemesis-Divinity, representing the anger of the gods, sent to punish human beings who are excessively proud, insolent, arrogant. The gods are conceived of by human beings as jealous, ready to punish those who commit the sin of hybris, pride, intemperate actions, insolence, arrogance. Hybris is usually thought of as stemming from prosperity, or good fortune.

Adapted for Instruction Purpose
Greek and Roman Classics
Meyer Reinhold

101 "HAMLET," TRAGEDY, AND REVENGE

HAMLET is a tragedy. Everybody knows that. And, indeed, the publishers of the pirated first edition of the play, which appeared in 1603, titled it "The Tragedie of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark," but we have no clear evidence that Shakespeare himself designated his plays as tragedies, comedies, or histories. In fact, he seems to poke fun at people who are overly fond of assigning categories to plays when he has Polonius divide them into "tragedy, comedy, history, pastoral, pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral, tragical-historical, tragical-comical-historical-pastoral. . . ."

Nevertheless, HAMLET is a tragedy — and, what is more, a *Shakespearean* tragedy. Although there is rich variety among Shakespeare's tragic plays, a simple definition might go something like this: In Shakespeare's tragedies we see a noble, heroic central character who is destroyed because a defect in his character either causes him to enmesh himself in circumstances which overpower him or makes him incapable of dealing with a destructive situation caused by another character or by circumstances.

He achieves insights which make him a more perceptive human being than he was when the play began.

How does Hamlet fit this definition? He is noble in birth and person, a prince of extraordinary intelligence; and, as the action of the play proves, he is heroic. His defect (call it indecision, excessive imagination, irrationality, madness, or what you will) prevents him from seizing control of the world Claudius has created. His death closes the play, but only after he experiences (and expresses) illuminations about human life and death which have made him a figure of fascination for almost 400 years.

One modern critic, Maynard Mack, has suggested that our experience of the hero of a Shakespearean tragedy normally occurs in three phases. In the first, he is introduced to the audience and his character is revealed to us. In the second, as he tries to cope with the conflict he faces — ~~the hero changes so greatly that he becomes almost his own opposite.~~ Hamlet, who was a student and a deliberate thinker, goes "mad" (whether in actuality or in "antic disposition"). Once the "glass of fashion," as Ophelia says, he now wanders around the court with his clothes in disarray; he acts brutally toward the girl he once loved; ~~the hero changes so greatly that he becomes almost his own opposite.~~

The third phase is a recovery and enlightenment. Hamlet no longer talks wildly or loses himself in conjecture; he is gracious to Laertes (~~the hero changes so greatly that he becomes almost his own opposite.~~)

and there is a new kind of serenity in his reflections about fate: "There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come. The readiness is all."

In one important way, however Hamlet is different from most of Shakespeare's other tragic heroes. Almost all the others create the situation which destroys them. King Lear gives his kingdom to his evil daughters; Macbeth murders his king; Romeo and Juliet persist in their love even though they know it is fraught with danger; Brutus helps to assassinate Caesar. But Hamlet is in no way responsible for the state of affairs which brings about his downfall; it already exists when the play begins, and it is entirely the work of Claudius.

HAMLET is usually classified as a "revenge tragedy." Revenge tragedies were very popular in Elizabethan times, and we know that a play similar to HAMLET, possibly by Thomas Kyd, the playwright whose "Spanish Tragedy" helped establish the form, was performed in the 1580's and 1590's.

Exactly as the name suggests, a revenge tragedy was a bloody, violent play dramatizing a detailed, bloodcurdling scheme to avenge some wickedness — frequently the murder of a close relative or loved one. The hero of a revenge tragedy does not cause the situation which begins the play. The villain, on whom the hero will eventually take vengeance, does.

HAMLET is a typical revenge tragedy in many ways. For one thing, its hero delays before working out his vengeance. Many reasons have been suggested for Hamlet's delay, including the simple fact that there would not be much of a play without it. We might also do well to remember that the hero of a revenge tragedy sometimes took the extra trouble to make sure that the soul of his victim would be eternally damned. This extra measure of vengeance suggests an explanation for one of the most-discussed moments in HAMLET: the scene in which Claudius is praying because he believes that the King's soul would go to heaven.

In recent years, a number of scholars have pointed out that Elizabethan Christians might have questioned Hamlet's assumption that revenge is a sacred duty; they would have recalled the Biblical injunction for private citizens to leave vengeance to God. Hamlet considers the possibility that the Ghost may be an agent of Hell, but he never questions the rightness of the Ghost's command to avenge the murder of elder Hamlet. How we view his situation depends largely on whether we think he should become an avenger.

Introduction to Drama

Drama was defined by Aristotle as "imitated human action." Here is a more complete definition of drama.

- A play has three parts. They are:
1. a story
 2. told in action and dialogue
 3. by actors who pretend they are the characters in the story.

Every civilization has found a way to dramatize human beliefs, emotions and desires. In earliest times, this action took the form of dances and lyrics. Following this, the ancient Greeks developed ritualistic ceremonies into the form of literature known as drama. Drama arose, then, from ancient religious ceremonies.

Greek Comedies and Tragedies - 500 B.C.

Comedies and tragedies were performed in ancient Greece. Comedy came from the fertility rites and revels of Dionysus, the Greek god of wine. These fertility rites, celebrated in the spring, recognized the rebirth of the earth. The period was a joyous time.

Tragedy came from the life and death rites of Dionysus. At a great festival held each year in honor of this god, competing playwrights presented their comedies and tragedies, and the winner was awarded a goat. Perhaps it was this prize itself that gave tragedy its name, for the word literally means goat-song.

To many people a tragedy is merely an unhappy sort of play in which one or more characters have a run of bad luck, eventually meeting a sad end. The ancient Greeks had no such simple idea, however, and to understand what tragedy was to the Greeks, it is necessary to review some basic concepts about which Greek culture centered.

Fate and Personal Flaw

First of all, the Greeks believed that every person's life was ruled by a pre-determined fate - a natural force set in motion by the gods and one that could not be altered under any circumstances.

Furthermore, it was believed that every person's fate held in store a personal allotment of unavoidable misery that would come about naturally. Misery in itself was not tragic but was something that every person expected.

The Greeks also believed, however, that people possess a certain freedom of will and action. Through proper exercise of this personal freedom, a person could live out his fate with dignity, bringing upon himself no more than his allotted share of grief. On the other hand, a person always stood in danger of misusing this freedom. Through some tragic flaw in his own character, he might tempt fate in such a way that he would come to lose all personal dignity and bring upon himself more pain and suffering than his fate had originally held in store for him. A Greek tragedy, then, is the story of the downfall of a basically good and noble individual who tempts fate because of some personal flaw in character, bringing upon himself extraordinary amounts of sorrow and suffering.

The Chorus

The chorus is an important feature of Greek drama. Often the chorus takes on the role of an actor and assumes an active part in the action of the play. The chorus was also used to interpret and retell past events, to comment on present actions, and to foretell the future. At other times, the chorus acted simply as spectators. In later periods of drama the chorus faded out of use.

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The Three Unities of Classical Drama

Time - The elapsed time of the play should be the same as the time it would take for these actions to transpire in daily life.

Place - The entire play should take place in one locale. Some believed it should all take place in one room.

Action - There should be only one plot taking place--no minor entanglements.

Sophocles is the name of a great Greek playwright who wrote

Oedipus the King

Antigone

Drama of the Middle Ages - 1500's

The Christian church had groups that acted out the life of Christ. These were called mystery plays.

Miracle plays were about lives of saints and martyrs.

The other religious plays were called morality plays. These plays provided people with moral lessons they could apply to their lives.

Elizabethan Drama 1600's

Shakespeare

The Elizabethans brought back and translated Greek drama, then added their own ideas and traditions. Shakespeare towers over the age as the most important playwright. He broke away from the formal Greek ideal. He did not follow the three unities.

Time - His plays had action that may have taken years take place in two hours on stage.

Place - His plays that were set in different cities, with his actors traveling from place to place.

Action - He had sub plots within his plays.

He wrote in poetry, using very refined and elegant language. He was considered barbaric by some at the time, but is now recognized as being a great playwright.

The theatres were closed by the Puritans in 1642 when they took over the government. They thought theatres were evil.

Restoration Drama

1700's

King Charles II was then returned to his throne, and theatres flourished again. Some authors went back to the old ideas of Greek drama and tried to follow them. This is called neo-classicism. They even rewrote Shakespeare to try to make his plays fit. Others were writing light comedies about life in the court.

The Shakespeare Plays: Mirrors of An Age

In his entire career, William Shakespeare never once set a play in Elizabethan England. His characters lived in medieval England (Richard II), France (As You Like It), Vienna (Measure For Measure), fifteenth-century Italy (Romeo and Juliet), the England ruled by Elizabeth's father (Henry VIII) and elsewhere--anywhere and everywhere, in fact, except Shakespeare's own time and place. But all Shakespeare's plays--even when they were set in ancient Rome--reflected the life of Elizabeth's England (and, after her death in 1603, that of her successor, James I). When Brutus in Julius Caesar puts on his gown and searches through pockets for a book he has been reading, we are in England, not in Rome; togas had no pockets and Rome had no printed books; they wrote primarily on scrolls.

Like all art, Shakespeare's plays mirror the life, language and ideas of the age in which they were created. They are extraordinary plays and they reflect an extraordinary world. Certain things about them will be easier to understand if we know a little more about Elizabethan England.

Elizabeth's reign was an age of exploration--exploration of the world, exploration of man's nature, and exploration of the far reaches of the English language. This sudden flowering of the spoken and written word gave us two great monuments--the King James Bible and the plays of Shakespeare--and many other treasures as well.

Shakespeare made full use of the adventurous Elizabethan attitude toward language. He employed more words than any other writer in history--more than 21,000 different words appear in the plays--and he never hesitated to try a new word, revive an old one, or make one up. Among the words which first appeared in print in his works are such everyday terms as critic, assassinate, bump, gloomy, suspicious, and hurry, and he invented literally dozens of phrases which we use today: such un-Shakespearean expressions as "catching a cold," "the mind's eye," "elbow room," and even "pomp and circumstance."

Elizabethan England was a time for heroes. The ideal man was a courtier, an adventurer, a fencer with the skill of Tybalt, a poet no doubt better than Orlando, a conversationalist with the wit of Rosalind and the eloquence of Richard the Second, and a gentleman. In addition to all this, he was expected to take the time, like Brutus, to examine his own nature and the causes of his actions and --perhaps unlike Brutus--to make the right choices. The real heroes of the age did all these things and more.

Despite the greatness of some Elizabethan ideals, others seem small and undignified to us: marriage, for example was often arranged to bring wealth or prestige to the family, with little regard for the feelings of the bride. In fact, women were still relatively powerless under the law.

The idea that women were "lower" than men was one small part of a vast concern with order which was extremely important to many Elizabethans. (Obviously, not all Elizabethans believed the same thing, any more than all modern people do.) Most people, however, believed that everything, from the lowest grain of sand to the highest angel, had its proper position in the scheme of things. This concept was called "the great chain of being." When things were in their proper place, harmony was the result; when order was violated, the entire structure was shaken.

This idea turns up again and again in Shakespeare. The rebellion against Richard II brings bloodshed to England for generations; Romeo and Juliet's rebellion against their parents contributes to their tragedy; and the assassination in Julius Caesar throws Rome into civil war.

Many Elizabethans also perceived duplications in the chain of order. They believed, for example, that what the sun is to the heavens, the king is to the state. When something went wrong in the heavens, rulers worried; before Julius

Caesar and Richard II were overthrown, comets and meteors appeared, the moon turned the color of blood, and other bizarre astronomical phenomena were reported. Richard himself compares his fall to a premature setting of the sun; when he descends from the top of Flint Castle to meet the conquering Bolingbroke, he likens himself to the driver of the sun's chariot in Greek mythology: "Down, down I come, like glistening phaeton..."

All these ideas find expression in Shakespeare's plays, along with hundreds of others--most of them not as strange to our way of thinking. As dramatized by the greatest playwright in the history of the world, the plays offer us a fascinating glimpse of the thoughts and passions of a brilliant age. Elizabethan England was a brief skyrocket of art, adventure and ideas which quickly burned out; but Shakespeare's plays keep the best parts of the time alight forever.