Tragedy and the Common Man by Arthur Miller
(*emphases added* by R. Cunningham)

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 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 high-bred character alone, it is inconceivable that *the mass of mankind* should *cherish[es] 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*.

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.

Ukraine?

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 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.

Psychology

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.

Sociology

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 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.

Nietsche

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from Robert W. Corrigan. *Tragedy: Vision and Form*. 2nd ed. New York: Harper, 1981.

Outline of Aristotle's Theory of Tragedy in the *Poetics*
By Barbara F. McManus, 1999.

Definition of Tragedy: "*Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude*; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its *katharsis* of such emotions. . . . *Every Tragedy, therefore, must have six parts*, which parts determine its quality—namely, *Plot, Characters, Diction, Thought, Spectacle, Melody*." (translation by S. H. Butcher; click on the context links to consult the full online text)
The treatise we call the *Poetics* was composed at least 50 years after the death of Sophocles. Aristotle was a great admirer of Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*, considering it the perfect tragedy, and not surprisingly, his analysis fits that play most perfectly. I shall therefore use this play to illustrate the following major parts of Aristotle's analysis of tragedy as a literary genre.

Tragedy is the "*imitation of an action*" (*mimesis*) according to "*the law of probability or necessity*." Aristotle indicates that the medium of tragedy is drama, not narrative; *tragedy "shows" rather than "tells."* According to Aristotle, tragedy is higher and more philosophical than history because *history simply relates what* has *happened while tragedy dramatizes what* may *happen*, "what is possible according to the law of probability or necessity." *History* thus *deals with the particular,* and *tragedy with the universal*. Events that have happened may be due to accident or coincidence; they may be particular to a specific situation and not be part of a clear cause-and-effect chain. Therefore they have little relevance for others. Tragedy, however, is rooted in the fundamental order of the universe; it creates a cause-and-effect chain that clearly reveals what *may* happen at any time or place because that is the way the world operates. *Tragedy* therefore *arouses* not only *pity [and]* but also *fear, because the audience can envision themselves within this cause-and- effect chain* (context).

Plot is the "first principle," the most important feature of tragedy. Aristotle defines plot as "the arrangement of the incidents": i.e., not the story itself but the way the incidents are presented to the audience, the structure of the play. According to Aristotle, tragedies where the outcome depends on a tightly constructed cause-and-effect chain of actions are superior to those that depend primarily on the character and personality of the protagonist. Plots that meet this criterion will have the following qualities (context). See *Freytag's Triangle* for a diagram that illustrates Aristotle's ideal plot structure, and Plot of *Oedipus the King* for an application of this diagram to Sophocles' play.

1. *The plot must be "a whole," with a beginning, middle, and end.* The beginning, called by modern critics the **incentive moment**, must start the cause-and-effect chain but not be dependent on anything outside the compass of the play (i.e., its causes are downplayed but its effects are stressed). The middle, or **climax**, must be caused by earlier incidents and itself cause the incidents that follow it (i.e., its causes and effects are stressed). The end, or **resolution**, must be caused by the preceding events but not lead to other incidents outside the compass of the play (i.e., its causes are stressed but its effects downplayed); the end should therefore solve or resolve the problem created during the incentive moment (context). Aristotle calls the cause-and-effect chain leading from the incentive moment to the climax the "tying up" (*desis*), in modern terminology the **complication**. He therefore terms the more rapid cause-and-effect chain from the climax to the resolution the "unravelling" (*lusis*), in modern terminology the **dénouement** (context).
2. The plot must be "complete," having "*unity of action*." By this Aristotle means that the plot must be structurally self-contained, with the incidents bound together by internal necessity, each action leading inevitably to the next with no outside intervention, no *deus ex machina* (context). According to Aristotle, the worst kinds of plots are "'episodic,' in which the episodes or acts succeed one another without probable or necessary sequence"; the only thing that ties together the events in such a plot is the fact that they happen to the same person. Playwrights should exclude coincidences from their plots; if some coincidence is required, it

should “have an air of design,” i.e., seem to have a fated connection to the events of the play (context). Similarly, the poet should exclude the irrational or at least keep it “outside the scope of the tragedy,” i.e., reported rather than dramatized (context). While the poet cannot change the myths that are the basis of his plots, he “ought to show invention of his own and skillfully handle the traditional materials” to create unity of action in his plot (context). Application to *Oedipus the King*.

3. *The plot must be “of a certain magnitude*,” both *quantitatively* (length, complexity) *and qualitatively* (“seriousness” and universal significance). Aristotle argues that plots should not be too brief; the more incidents and themes that the playwright can bring together in *an organic unity*, the greater the artistic value and richness of the play. Also, the more universal and significant the meaning of the play, the more the playwright can catch and hold the emotions of the audience, the better the play will be (context).
4. The plot may be either simple or complex, although complex is better. Simple plots have only a “change of fortune” (*catastrophe*). Complex plots have both “*reversal of intention*” (*peripeteia*) and “*recognition*” (*anagnorisis*) connected with the catastrophe. Both *peripeteia* and *anagnorisis* turn upon surprise. Aristotle explains that a *peripeteia occurs when a character produces an effect opposite to that which he intended* to produce, while an *anagnorisis* “*is a change from ignorance to knowledge*, producing love or hate between the persons destined for good or bad fortune.” He argues that the best plots combine these two as part of their cause-and-effect chain (i.e., the *peripeteia* leads directly to the

anagnorisis); this in turns creates the *catastrophe*, leading to the final "scene of suffering" (context). Application to *Oedipus the King*.

Character has the second place in importance. In a perfect tragedy, character will support plot, i.e., personal motivations will be intricately connected parts of the cause-and-effect chain of actions producing pity and fear in the audience. *The protagonist should be renowned and prosperous,* so his change of fortune can be from good to bad. This change "should come about as the result, not of vice, but of some great error or frailty in a character." Such a plot is most likely to generate pity and fear in the audience, for "*pity is aroused by unmerited misfortune, fear by the misfortune of a man like ourselves.*" The term Aristotle uses here, *hamartia*, often translated "tragic flaw," has been the subject of much debate. The meaning of the Greek word is closer to "mistake" than to "flaw," and I believe it is best interpreted in the context of what Aristotle has to say about plot and "the law or probability or necessity." In the ideal tragedy, claims Aristotle, the protagonist will mistakenly bring about his own downfall—not because he is sinful or morally weak, but because he does not know enough. *The role of the hamartia in tragedy comes* not from its moral status but *from the inevitability of its consequences*. *Hence the peripeteia is really one or more self-destructive actions taken in blindness,* leading to results diametrically opposed to those that were intended (often termed **tragic irony**), and the *anagnorisis is the gaining of the essential knowledge that was previously lacking* (context).

Characters in tragedy should have the following qualities (context):

1. “good or fine.” Aristotle relates this quality to moral purpose and says it is relative to class: “Even a woman may be good, and also a slave, though the woman may be said to be an inferior being, and the slave quite worthless.”
2. “fitness of character” (true to type); e.g. valor is appropriate for a warrior but not for a woman.
3. “true to life” (realistic)
4. “consistency” (true to themselves). Once a character's personality and motivations are

established, these should continue throughout the play.

5. “necessary or probable.” Characters must be logically constructed according to “the law of

probability or necessity” that governs the actions of the play.

6. “true to life and yet more beautiful” (idealized, ennobled).

Thought is third in importance, and is found “where something is proved to be or not to be, or a general maxim is enunciated.” Aristotle says little about thought, and most of what he has to say is associated with how speeches should reveal character (context 1; context 2). However, we may assume that this category would also include what we call the **themes** of a play.

Diction is fourth, and is “the expression of the meaning in words” which are proper and

appropriate to the plot, characters, and end of the tragedy. In this category, Aristotle discusses the stylistic elements of tragedy; he is particularly interested in metaphors: “But the greatest thing by far is to have a command of metaphor; . . . it is the mark of genius, for to make

good metaphors implies an eye for resemblances" (context). Application to *Oedipus the King*.

Song, or melody, is fifth, and is the musical element of the chorus. Aristotle argues that the Chorus should be fully integrated into the play like an actor; choral odes should not be "mere interludes," but should contribute to the unity of the plot (context).

Spectacle is last, for it is least connected with literature; "the production of spectacular effects depends more on the art of the stage machinist than on that of the poet." Although Aristotle recognizes the emotional attraction of spectacle, he argues that superior poets rely on the inner structure of the play rather than spectacle to arouse pity and fear; those who rely heavily on spectacle "create a sense, not of the terrible, but only of the monstrous" (context 1; context 2).

The end of the tragedy is a katharsis (purgation, cleansing) of the tragic emotions of pity and fear. *Katharsis* is another Aristotelian term that has generated considerable debate. The word means "purging," and Aristotle seems to be employing a medical metaphor—tragedy arouses the emotions of pity and fear in order to purge away their excess, to reduce these passions to a healthy, balanced proportion. Aristotle also talks of the "pleasure" that is proper to tragedy, apparently meaning the aesthetic pleasure one gets from contemplating the pity and fear that are aroused through an intricately constructed work of art (context).

We might profitably compare this view of Aristotle with that expressed by Susanne Langer in our first reading ("Expressiveness in Art," excerpt from *Problems of Art: Ten Philosophical Lectures*, New York, Scribner, 1957):

A work of art presents feeling (in the broad sense I mentioned before, as everything that can be felt) for our contemplation, making it visible or audible or in some way perceivable through a symbol, not inferable from a symptom. Artistic form is congruent with the dynamic forms of our direct sensuous, mental, and emotional life; works of art . . . are images of feeling, that formulate it for our cognition. What is artistically good is whatever articulates and presents feeling for our understanding. (661-62)

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