

Tragic Catharsis

The most significant element that distinguishes tragedy from other forms of drama is the tragic effect. Just what it is in tragedy that gives pleasure through pain is difficult to determine. Friedrich Schlegel felt that the tragic tone was one of "irrepressible melancholy," as the audience is consoled and elevated through witnessing human weakness exposed to the vagaries of fate and natural forces. Arthur Schopenhauer saw the meaning of tragedy as resignation and renunciation in the face of a miserable and desolate existence. On the other hand, H. A. Myers asserts that tragedy appeals to us because it satisfies our craving to discover, even in moments of utmost suffering and evil, patterns in life which are truly representative of life and therefore just. What constitutes the tragic effect is thus capable of many interpretations.

Our individual sense of the tragic is complex and highly personalized; it is arrived at through our experience and awareness. In such plays as *Hamlet* and *Antigone*, as we seek to interpret the play with our experience and with our attitudes about life, we perceive values beyond what is explicit in the story and stage action. The play's events are raised to a universal level and move us, as Professor Alan Thompson says, ". . . to the impassioned contemplation of ultimates."

To understand the tragic effect, it is necessary to keep Aristotle's words "fear and pity" before us. What did he mean by them? Pity is not simply pathos, a soft sentiment of sorrow for one who is weak or unworthy. Pity is not contemptuous or patronizing. Implied in tragic pity is an equality, a sharing of grief. We enter into the experience of another through our sympathy and our fellow feeling. We feel pity for the tragic hero as an act of compassion. Similarly, the meaning of the word fear must be extended beyond that of sheer fright or terror to include anxious concern, solicitude, awe, reverence, and apprehension. In tragedy, fear is not merely a hair-raising, spine-tingling reaction of the nervous system; it is an emotion that warms the heart and illuminates the mind. Fear carries a sense of wonder. The terms fear and pity, therefore, must be thought of in their most human and universal context, as involving a general concern for others rather than a private and personal identification with disaster.

Aristotle obviously intended that catharsis should be therapeutic. The tragic effect on the spectator is to purge away his fear and pity, to give him a sense of release and tranquillity. He is cleansed and exhilarated when he is liberated from his own emotional entanglements and disturbing passions. Fear gives way to certainty, even though that certainty is death. Pity goes beyond feeling and becomes understanding. The spectator leaves the theater "in calm of mind, all passion spent." The end result is, as Northrop Frye suggests, that the audience experiences a "kind of buoyancy." Or again, in Edith Hamilton's words, "the great soul in pain and death transforms and exalts pain and death." Myers universalizes the meaning more explicitly:

These are the main features of the tragic spirit. It lifts us above self-pity and reconciles us to suffering by showing that evil is a necessary part of the intelligible and just order of our experience. It lifts us above the divisive spirit of melodrama by showing that men are neither naturally good nor inherently evil. It saves us all from the pitfalls of utopianism and fatalism. It teaches moderation by showing that the way of the extremist is short, but at the same time it shows the man of principle that an uncompromising stand is not without its just compensations. And most important, it teaches us that all men are united in the kinship of a common fate, that all are destined to suffer and enjoy, each to his capacity.

excerpted from *Drama: Principles and Plays*, edited and introduction by Theodore W. Hatlen (New York, Appleton Century Crofts, 1967) and quotes are all attributed by Professor Hatlen to *Tragedy: A View of Life*, by Henry A. Myers (Ithaca NY, Cornell University Press, 1956)