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Perspectives of Tragedy

As we have grown up our perceptions of what tragedy is change. Aristotle, was the first great thinker to talk about tragedy, and how it should be evaluated. His words of how tragedy should be evaluated would stick around in mainstream thought for around two millennia. Aristotle, believed that an essential element to tragedy was a man “held in great esteem and enjoys good fortune”(21), but falls from his pedestal “not due to any moral defect or depravity, but… as a result of an error of some kind” (21). He held the idea that this person’s fall from grace would inspire us with “fear and pity” as a consequence of watching “people better than we are”,(25) ultimately gain from their loss. However, the article *Tragedy and the Common Man* by Arthur Miller states “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 were are in this world….. In fact, it is the common man who knows this fear best”(16-19). The point that Miller makes against Aristotle is that the royal are often not held as accountable for their actions as the common man. We must come to understand that tragedy does affect us even though we are often exposed to great tragedies such as “Romeo and Juliet” and “Hamlet”, and when we look at the characteristics that make up a tragedy we must see how they affect our everyday lives. 

In today’s society one must pose the question of why don’t we talk about tragedy more? Just like music if tragedy is listened to or talked about too often we lose appreciation for what it can teach us. The origins of tragedy are from Ancient Greece because people loved plays with tragedies in them. At first it might seem disturbing to think that people get entertainment out of the suffering of others, we are all human, and one cannot deny the connection between tragedy and the reality tv epidemic we see today. Due to Roman expansion into Greek territory the Romans began to develop their own forms of tragedy, and later came the Renaissance form of tragedy. Both of these new forms of tragedy had similar qualities to Greek tragedies. However, this is nothing new most tragedies contain the same characteristics. These characteristics are a person with heroic qualities but is imperfect. In the article “Tragedy and the Common Man” by Arthur Miller introduces this characteristic as the: tragic flaw.

In “Tragedy of the Common Man” by Miller, opens with how tragedy is often not relatable due the fact that people see tragedy as somehow beneath them. I strongly disagree with this idea. In most classical tragedies, we are given characters that are almost always based on wealth and royal blood; Romeo and Juliet were both from extremely wealthy families, Oedipus was a king, Hamlet was royal. With this how tragedy suppose to relate to the common man whose life is while bland. Although we may not be able to relate to the situations the characters face we can relate to them emotionally. He then goes on the explain that the tragic flaw is “a failing that is not peculiar to grand or elevated characters.” In other words this characteristic is not necessarily a weakness, but a simple characteristic a hero has. The part that makes it a tragic flaw is that the hero either fails to overcome it or even see it at all. Miller then states that a character's inability to remain passive, and overcome their tragic flaw makes them flawed. In other words, he is saying a character must overcome this to become flawless. He proceeds to fit most common people in this category. I disagree because most people will never recognize their flaws even if they stared them straight in the face this causes tragedies to be more relatable since the hero doesn’t see their flaws either.

As I said we can all relate to tragedies because we are all imperfect. But how else can tragedy connect to us? We can also relate to tragedy in that we all have dreams, and for most of us those dreams involve being successful. Ultimately, we all interpret success differently but our definition is often overshadowed by society's definition. Society’s view of success involves copious amounts of fame, power, and of course money. As people we often bend our own definitions to fit into the mold society wants. The consequence of this is that a lot of people are working at careers that they never really wanted. According to de Botton's TED Talk titled "A Kinder, Gentler Philosophy of Success" states we are led to believe that certain people are destined for success, and if you fail than it is a result of one not being good enough to be successful. He also goes on to state that this idea evolved from the idea that we are the drivers of our lives. Not only is this view very depressing, but it is very untrue. I think people who are successful got there through a combination of talent and hard work. There are many people who are extremely talented, but don’t have the drive to refine their talents. This is tragic, because they will never know their full potential. However, it is just as tragic when people make it to the top society, but find themselves unhappy. For example, when I was around ten I wanted to go to the Olympics for swimming. I remember the only reason why I wanted to do it was because they were on Tv. Then I realized how many Olympians don’t live as long, and often only go to two Olympic competitions and then retire. Even though swimming was still the sport that I loved I realized at that level it came with major drawbacks. It would have been a tragedy if I had decided to pursue that dream because I would have realized that all that hard work would be over after four years. Everyday people often deal with tragedy in terms of how it relates to their failure to achieve their dreams.

Although it is obvious to us how tragedies occur in everyday life it is still important to look at tragic plays to see the characteristics of a tragedy since these characteristics tend to be more apparent in play. The story of Oedipus Rex is a tragedy about a hero named Oedipus who tries to find out who his parents are because of a horrible prophecy that he was cursed with. The prophecy states that he would kill his father, and marry his mother and his obsession with finding out who his parents are is his tragic flaw. A common element in this story is irony because Tiresias the man who has the most insight into the truth about Oedipus is blind. He is very enlightened and tries to prevent Oedipus from finding out the truth. “Dismiss me, send me home. That will be the easiest way for both of us to bear our burden ... I will not cause pain to myself or to you. Why do you question me? It is useless. You will get nothing from me.” (20-21). This reflects Oedipus’s persistence to find out who is parents are, and Laius murderer. The irony is that Oedipus spends a lot of time trying to find Laius killer when he is Laius murderer. Jocasta, his wife, and mother tries to stop Oedipus from being obsessed with this because she discovers the truth before he does, and wants to prevent him from going insane. "In God's name, if you place any value on your life, don't pursue the search. It is enough that I am sick to death. ... Take my advice, I beg you-do not go on with it. It is good advice I am giving you-I am thinking of you." (77-78). When Oedipus refuses Jocasta vanishes and ends up taking her own life. When Oedipus finds out the truth he tries to find Jocasta, and finds her hanging in their bedroom. He then proceeds to take her clothes pins and stab his eyes out. The irony of this is because he now sees the truth, he is blind, like Tiresias. Oedipus Rex is classified as a tragedy because he is a hero with a flaw, and with that flaw comes misfortune. The question I pose is due all bad events qualify as a tragedy? If you think this than you're in for a surprise. 

It is important to look at the “misfortune” that occurs in tragedies because not all misfortune is tragic. *The Tragic Fallacy* by Joseph Krutch brings up important things to get a deeper meaning behind tragedy. A important piece of the puzzle to take note of is noble because tragedies often occur when nobility is involved. He emphasizes to the reader to refer to the events as “calamities” to describe a bad situations. The term calamity refers to the disastrous aspects of the event and reflects how it affects the character's emotions. Krutch states “it is only in calamity that the human spirit has the opportunity to reveal itself triumphant over the outward universe which fails to conquer it, but this calamity in tragedy is only a means to an end." He then goes on to explain the difference between true tragedy and sad writings stating that the only difference is the author makes us believe that the character is taking noble action. In other words, just because something bad happens to a character we perceive as good doesn’t make it a real tragedy. A tragedy only happens when a person is fully aware of the calamities and is still confident “of the greatness of man,” whose true personality and nobility is shown when he is conquered by a calamity. A good example of this would be “Romeo and Juliet”. Romeo and Juliet were aware of the fact that their families were rivals, but they decided to be in love with one another anyway. Their deaths are tragic because they our heros in their own way, fighting for the right to love each other. The second way is that they both have flaws which is the fact that they are stuck in a bad situation where their love of each other is unacceptable to everyone they love. The third way is when faced with the decision to either be without each other or to fight the disapproval of their families, but stay together they chose to stay together. People are not usually this extreme in opinion, but they believed in the power of their love, and their passion showed in the the willingness to be shunned for their decision.

In addition to calamities and nobility, Krutch’s *Tragic Fallacy* also states that tragedies always have a happy ending. The reader may see a happy ending as impossible due to all the calamities the characters face. However, all tragedies end with the hero being successful which prompts a happy ending. In *Romeo and Juliet*, they were successful in their love for one another, and not allowing their families to intervene with their love. In *Oedipus Rex* he discovers who his parents were, and power of prophecies. Most tragedies contain a happy ending this is important to reader because the happy ending often covers up some of the darker topics of tragedies.

*Antigone* also holds many of the characteristics of a tragedy, but they can be interpreted by the reader in a multitude of ways. Antigone is the hero of the story, and her flaw is that she is to warmhearted. She goes against Kreon's law and gives her brother Polyneices a proper burial because she believes no matter a person's actions they deserve a proper burial. She is fully aware of the fact that she will be punished, but she does it any, this demonstrates her nobility. As a result, Kreon punishes her which leads to her death, but the ending is happy because Antigone stood up for what she believed in.

However, in essence the story of *Antigone* contains two tragedies because Kreon suffers. He is a hero because he is a good leader, but his tragic flaw is he is very prideful. He intends to prosecute Antigone for her crime, and he is successful in doing so, but he loses his son Haimon, Antigone’s fiance, and his wife. In the end Kreon realizes his tragic flaw of being too prideful, but it is too late. Both of these interpretations qualify as tragedies, but is interesting to note the contrast between Antigone’s tragedy and Kreon’s.

In *Antigone*, Antigone was prosecuted for following her beliefs, and the government tried to put limitations on what she could and couldn’t do. When any type of law forces a set of moral values that one does not necessarily believe that is tragic. The limitations set by a government should be only to keep people safe, but not infringe on their right to practice what they believe. To talk about limitations one must look at Kafka’s *Before the Law* parable. The parable is about a man who is trying to get access to the law, but puts limitations on himself to keep him from doing so. The boxes that we put ourselves often cause us to miss opportunities, and keep us from achieving our fullest potential. Some might consider this the greatest form of tragedy, and I would agree with them. Laws and governments can also place limitations on people especially when a government imposes a religion on its citizens that they might not have followed originally. *Antigone* address both forms of limitations in that Antigone could have chosen to put limits on herself for fear of the consequences of her decision or she could have let Kreon’s law stop her from giving Polyneices a proper burial. However, she chose to break free from all of these potential limits, and acted on her own moral compass. Antigone will serves as an inspiration to others in that letting them know the only thing that can hold them back from achieving something meaningful is fear.

Tragedy is a true art form, and it serves as a tower of hope in that all are struggles produce something good. In a way it serves the same function as religion it provides people with the idea that we all have hardships to bear, and that we will survive no matter what. My first impression of tragedies was that they were sad stories that didn’t really lead anywhere. However, I now see that even though they have dark undertones they always have a happy ending. Tragedies encourage people through dark times in reminding them that they are not alone, and to stick to their beliefs and they will find a light at the end of the tunnel. Tragedies serve as a tower of hope for the reader and encourages new ideas, inspiration, and allows emotion to flow openly. Thanks to tragedy I feel can be more open about my own struggles because I have realized that we all struggle, and that it is an illusion that you no one else has gone through something similar. I hope that people who study tragedies after me can come to the same epiphany I have seen along the way. 

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