

FRANK  
STEIN  
GREENE

A Search for Tragedy in American Drama  
by James Irwin Greene, 1960

I know noble accents  
And lucid, inescapable rhythms;  
But I know, too,  
That the blackbird is involved  
In what I know.

from "Thirteen Ways of Looking at  
a Blackbird" by Wallace Stevens

of a rana

This paper is dedicated to the late George H. Foster--  
who always suggested with wisdom.



## A Search for Tragedy in American Drama

by James I. Greene

### Preface

American dramatic critics have a tendency to regard the theater as an outspoken child. Chastisements run from the mild to the severe. And there are those who continue to defend their pet love through the most adverse criticism. "Sometimes I feel sorry for the theater. So many people demand so many different things of it." This remark is taken from the drama section of the New York Herald Tribune, written by one of America's most-read and most-influential critics--Walter Kerr. I have chosen his remark to begin the discussion of tragedy in American drama because it represents a contemporary feeling, a feeling that needs to be carefully examined. Walter Kerr is a staunch champion of the popular play, the play with mass appeal, the play that is able "to tell us something about ourselves."<sup>1</sup> Thus Mr. Kerr, who is also a humanitarian, feels obliged to defend the merits of such current "hits" as Sweet Bird of Youth, J. B., and Gypsy because in some measure they reflect "our way of looking at the world."<sup>2</sup>

Eric Bentley says: "Observers from every point of view would agree that the theater at the moment is in a more than usually uncertain and disordered state."<sup>3</sup> Mr. Bentley is not one known for compromise. He does not console himself with productions that approach the mark. He is aware that "Masterpieces come seldom; the theater opens its doors nightly."<sup>4</sup>

Mr. Bentley's criterion is high. In fact it is so high that he admits: "It would be nice to like O'Neill. He is the leading American playwright...."<sup>5</sup> He cannot, however, justify the faults he finds in Eugene O'Neill in spite of his reputation.

Such diverse values must leave the spectator in a serious quandary. What is "good" and "bad" in terms of the American theater? Someone must have the answer. If we can't be sure of our critics, to whom can we turn? This is a familiar cry. The New York newspaper critics are condemned for their absolute power and poor writing; Eric Bentley is chastised for his ambiguity and dissatisfaction with anything less than perfection.

The sad commentary is that in our age of specialization we have become dependent upon the experts to guide and even form our opinion. Each expert, however, has his own set of values. Critical opinion is worn like a new suit and changes appropriately with the weather. What we need is a reassessment and some uniform definitions.

This paper is an attempt to discover the meaning of tragedy in American drama.

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## Introduction

Many critics have challenged the validity of American drama by claiming a lack of tragedy. This challenge accuses our whole civilization. Some critics still accept the Aristotelian definition as the only authoritative one. Others have tried to piece together a new definition that answers the need of our civilization. The confusion and disagreement have left many wondering about the essential qualities of tragedy.

Karl W. Deutsch, writing in the introduction to Karl Jasper's Tragedy Is Not Enough, says: "Tragedy, therefore, is fundamental and inevitable in human life. Tragedy occurs wherever awareness exceeds power; and particularly where awareness of a major need exceeds the power to satisfy it."<sup>1</sup> This is an accurate description of our situation. Karl Deutsch continues: "As human powers grow, and old needs are satisfied, awareness will have grown as much or more, and new needs and new tragedies will have been discovered."<sup>2</sup> We must try to understand ourselves in relation to the events that have dominated and influenced our civilization. The crying need of our civilization is to understand who we are.

Dramatic tragedy can reveal the germs of society's disease better than any other art form because of the nature of the medium and its emphasis. Aristotle defines tragedy as the imitation of an action. He means that tragedy reflects the human condition. In dramatic tragedy the crisis of the individual is examined realistically.

The tragedian has always felt the responsibility of revealing man in his crisis. Every age shares the awareness of man in crisis. It is the complexities advanced by new knowledge that change the emphasis of crisis from age to age.

Thomas Heywood wrote a domestic tragedy in 1603, A Woman Killed With Kindness. This play "was among the first English plays to draw a realistic picture of contemporary home life in the English countryside and to show that the domestic tragedies of ordinary people can be as moving as those of the great."<sup>3</sup> This play treats the theme of adultery boldly but not sensationally. Heywood understood the ordinary man of his century.

In our own century, Arthur Miller has questioned the "stature" of the usual Greco-Elizabethan hero in modern life:

I had not understood that these matters are measured by Greco-Elizabethan paragraphs which hold no mention of insurance payments, front porches, refrigerator fan belts, steering knuckles, Chevrolets, and visions seen not through the portals of Delphi but in the blue flame of the hot-water heater.<sup>4</sup>

Both Heywood and Miller have believed that the "common man is as apt a subject for tragedy in its highest sense as kings" have been.<sup>5</sup>

The middle-class man is the most vital member of the democratic system. He represents a faith which can be termed affirmation of life. This is a mature faith based on the endurance of a successful way of life. The pressure of complexity, however, has enormously confused our position. Max Lerner has put his finger on

our period of transition:

The intellectual revolution of the Twentieth Century is likely to prove the charting of the terra incognita of the irrational and the extricating of its implications for every area of human thought.<sup>6</sup>

The test of our faith is still to come with the discovery of outer space and a new rational understanding of our universe. Some of the old gods are dead; those that are to endure must pass the test.

Tragedy as an art form has undergone an agonizing struggle. Arthur Miller has given his summation of the purpose of tragedy: "Tragedy enlightens by pointing the finger at the enemy of man's freedom. In tragedy nothing is unchanging or inevitable. The essence of tragedy is the questioning spirit."<sup>7</sup> The importance of tragedy is revealed to us in this statement. Americans cherish freedom as their most precious right. Freedom is a growing spirit; it is not "unchanging or inevitable." Freedom represents the life-force of American civilization.

It must be remembered that the individual created freedom. The individual has the power to establish the good life. The value of tragedy is that it awakens our senses and intellects to the eternal ethical problem.

Tragedy in the classic sense has always been, and remains, a kind of religion in its own right. It has sought to impose a pattern upon the patternless; to create an independent logic by relating cause and effect where actual living is most frequently illogical.<sup>8</sup>

This explanation describes the artistic organization and force behind the birth of tragedy. Tragedy is "a kind of religion" in combining faith and doctrine. The faith is a tangible belief in

the growth of man and society through knowledge. It presents an artistic doctrine by piecing together the invisible conflicts of human life and making them visible to the audience.

In tragedy we see Man in all his splendor and weakness striving for the greatest heights and failing because he is Man. The audience is able to transcend this "failing" by observing the possibility of man's achievement.

## Part Two--Contrast and Comparison

One cannot investigate tragedy without paying homage to Aristotle. There are those who still insist that Aristotle defined tragedy for all time. It is more logical, however, to say that Aristotle defined tragedy in terms of the Greek drama. In order to form any new definition, we must see how far we have come from Grecian civilization.

Aristotle defined tragedy as "The imitation of an action that is serious and also, as having magnitude, complete in itself; in language with pleasurable accessories, each kind brought in separately in the parts of the work; in a dramatic, not in a narrative form; with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its catharsis of such emotions."<sup>1</sup>

Aristotle asserted that "...the life and soul...of Tragedy is the Plot; and that the Characters come second...."<sup>2</sup> He maintained that tragedy is an "imitation of an action" in life, and therefore the plot is the first essential. It is hard to disagree that the dramatic art form is held together by action, but one must admit that there are varying degrees of action. Aristotle presented an analogy: "...compare the parallel in painting, where the most beautiful colours laid on without order will not give one the same pleasure as a simple black-and-white sketch of a portrait."<sup>3</sup> In Aristotle's time this was true enough. Today our art places a powerful emphasis on interpretation, often abstract, and greatly augmented by the use of provocative colors. Aristotle would undoubtedly have to make a considerable adjustment if he could see our modern art.



Just as art has changed its emphasis, so had the drama. Plot is subordinated ultimately to the tragic hero's reaction of awareness. Aristotle made the statement that "a tragedy is impossible without action, but there may be one without character." Aristotle admitted that a characterless tragedy represents "a defect common among poets of all kinds."<sup>4</sup> Ashley H. Thorndike also notes Aristotle's distinction: "Aristotle emphasized the action above the characterization, and devoted much attention to the requirements of the plot."<sup>5</sup> In Aristotle's day the plot had a greater importance than it does today. Plot was a natural outgrowth of the fertile Greek imagination. Plot became the essence of tragedy, and often incident dominated characterization.

This is no longer true. A modern tragedy cannot exist without potent and acute characterization. One might say that characterization feeds modern tragedy.

H. A. Myers says: "Aristotle ignores the possibility that the hero's fate may truly represent the destiny of man."<sup>6</sup> Aristotle speaks of the universal in tragedy, but he does not pinpoint the issue. He does not relate the universal to the spectator in the special, intimate fashion that makes tragedy effective. The tragic hero must maintain a close association with the audience. Aristotle does not define the term "catharsis" for his readers. He uses the words "pity" and "fear" as the necessary emotions in order to accomplish a catharsis, but he has left the definition to the modern critics. Effective tragedy demands that the spectator become a part of the tragic protagonist.

Experience has proved that purgation is impossible when the spectator is made aware on a dual level. The spectator is engaged by the hero because of a feeling of oneness and is at the same time kept at a distance because of an unfamiliar tenseness.

The tragic hero lives a heightened reality. He is willing to accept an enormous risk; he is willing to risk his life for a dream. It is a noble, even glorified dream that pushes man to the limits of his endurance. The tragic protagonist is a hero because he is most acutely alive. The half-closed senses of the spectator are aroused by the tragic figure.

A great part of tragedy is emotional, but it is not the soaring emotion of the Romantics. It is concerned with the true and natural emotions experienced in daily life.

Rationality is the key to understanding and recognizing tragedy. Rationality kills bathos. Rationality is not a comfortable doctrine; it does not avoid basic issues. The tragic art form exerts control over emotion, never letting it get out of hand or dominate reason.

Thus the spectator, though awakened by emotion, is made aware by reason. Reason finally jells into understanding because of the revelation exposed by tragedy. It is an intuitive and psychological process which makes the spectator aware of himself as an individual and consequently of the world in which he lives.

Dramatic tragedy has never flinched from revealing the brutal aspects of life. It reveals them with loving care in the hope that men will profit from their revelation. Thus tragedy

can be religious in the broad sense of the word. It is religious in that it is infused with realistic faith. Like a great bath, it tries to cleanse humanity by purgation. It does not want to diminish faith in an after-life, but it does want to affirm faith in this life.

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In the Elizabethan Age, Shakespeare abandoned the tragic type for the tragic individual. The Greek tragic figure was a victim of circumstance. Retribution was inherited. The series of murders in Aeschylus's Oresteia can be traced back to the curse on the house of Atreus. The intervention of gods and goddesses is a crucial feature. Individuality was subordinated to the influence of fate.

Shakespeare made the individual responsible. The tragic flaw of the individual becomes his Nemesis. King Lear is a victim of his own impetuosity; Hamlet is consumed by introspection.<sup>7</sup> Shakespeare refused to let the individual hide behind the mystery of the unknown.

As H. A. Myers points out, it is interesting to look at Romeo and Juliet for a glimpse at Shakespeare's conception of tragedy. In The Prologue the Chorus comments that "A pair of star-cross'd lovers take their life." This play is interesting because it belies this original statement in its tragic ending. Romeo wills his own suicide. He is a free spirit who surrenders himself to love.

The conflict between the houses of Capulet and Montague is in keeping with the proposed "star-cross'd lovers" theme. The frustration seems foreordained. The fact is, however, that curiosity and stubborn will hold the two lovers together. The youthful Romeo is intrigued at the prospect of attending a dance given by the Capulet family. Romeo is an intense and impetuous young man, whose romantic infatuation is brought back to earth by the practical Juliet:

If that thy bent of love be honourable,  
Thy purpose marriage, send me word tomorrow...

Romeo and Juliet are universal; they represent the short-lived joys and sorrows of youth. The rival houses cannot kill their love. The hero and heroine die for love. Their tragic suicides resolve the enmity of the families. There is a bitter sweetness in this ending that avoids the sentimental because the tension between good and evil, though lyrical, is realistic enough. Characterization triumphs over plot.

In Julius Caesar Cassius speaks to Brutus of individual will:

The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars,  
But in ourselves, that we are underlings.

The plot against Caesar is organized by men who are willing to take the risk to realize their ideal. Brutus is an idealist, acting on the dictates of his conscience. Nevertheless, his motives have been criticized. There is enough complication in his character to suggest that his actions might be based on an unconscious egoism.

His vanity turns scarlet in heated conversation with Cassius in the camp near Sardis:

Must I observe you? Must I stand and crouch  
Under your testy humour?

Brutus, like Romeo, has sacrificed everything for his dream. There is, however, a sharp contrast between the ideal and reality. Reality demands a high toll.

King Lear contradicts Cassius:

It is the stars,  
The stars above us, govern our conditions:

Lear is completely lacking in subtlety. He is so much a man that he cannot understand the female guile of Goneril and Regan. Shakespeare lets his characters speak for themselves. They may contradict each other because they are individuals. Shakespeare does not intrude and make his characters the mouthpiece of his philosophy.

Hamlet is a tragedy of revenge. Hamlet is one of Shakespeare's most complex heroes. His introspection is highly disturbing and has given birth to varied analyses. Hamlet is full of the subtleties that are prevalent in modern psychological drama.

Shakespeare employed a stylized brand of irony. He was never afraid to emphasize his tragedies with broad sprinklings of humor. His tragic heroes, though of noble birth, are related to his mass audience because of their human strengths and weaknesses.

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Tragedy is commonly confused with its weak sister--melodrama. H. A. Myers explains that melodrama divides its characters into black and white.<sup>8</sup> The audience is carefully instructed to

recognize "Good" and "Bad" by a hard, easily distinguishable line. "Good" always wins; "Bad" always receives a just punishment. Poetic justice is consciously carried out. Emotions are calculated according to a pattern of human nature that can be described as a formula.

In melodrama the spectator must be satisfied on an emotional level. The thirst for suspense, action, and "thrills" is quenched. When it is all over, the spectator feels that he has had a good time. This emotion is at best transitory for a pleasant and diverting experience. Melodrama can be played at different levels. There is an obvious difference in quality between a television western and Dial M for Murder. Technique and sophistication can and do vary.

One basic difference between melodrama and tragedy is characterization. Characterization is of prime importance in tragedy. Plot is the primary element in melodrama. The uniqueness of the individual is the consideration of tragedy. The tragic hero is drawn from life and therefore is a composite of good and bad qualities. The audience recognizes this tragic figure and identifies itself with him.

If melodrama is to the right of tragedy, naturalism is to the left. Naturalism lacks the nobility of tragedy. Naturalism attempts to represent the more sordid aspects of life unblinkingly. While naturalism usually ends in depression, tragedy offers the spectator a perspective and a final uplifting or purgation.

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American tragedy is not a breed apart. It has consciously felt the weighty influence of historical tragedy. American tragedy, however, has undergone a massive struggle. The search for definition has produced many brilliant failures. The encouraging fact is that our greatest playwrights have been willing to take the risk in order to create modern tragedy. Their search for tragedy has actually been a search for value.

If we are to find coherence in American tragedy, we must understand the different approaches. We have, on one hand, Maxwell Anderson, who is a neo-Aristotelian. He tries to follow the basic precepts set down in Aristotle's Poetics. Anderson has said that "it is inescapable that prose is the language of information and poetry the language of emotion," and, therefore, "it is incumbent on the dramatist to be a poet, and incumbent on the poet to be a prophet, dreamer and interpreter of the racial dream."<sup>8</sup> We might call Anderson a traditionalist.

On the other hand, there is Arthur Miller, who has released tragedy from the hold of antiquity. Miller believes in the necessity of the "poem of a play" rather than poetry:

The underlying poem of a play I take to be  
the organic necessity of its parts...the fiat  
for intense language is intensity of happening.<sup>9</sup>

Although Anderson emphasizes poetry and Miller the poetic, they are not really so far apart. They both believe in the special emotional feeling of tragedy. And they both have tried to create tragedy "out of the stuff of their own times."

It would seem, therefore, that modern tragedy is going in the same direction although the emphasis varies with the individual

author.

As we approach our consideration of the American playwrights who have tried to write tragedy, we will be chiefly concerned with the treatment of the tragic protagonist. Our playwrights, following in the Shakespearean tradition, have broken with the Aristotelian definition of tragedy by making their primary concern the individual and his predicament. Our playwrights have examined their subjects with a merciless scalpel. They have probed into the complexities that are imminent in our time.

Nevertheless, our realistic worry does not have to be solved by our dramatists, who are not psychiatrists. The tragedian must reveal a nobility of purpose in the hero in order to write real tragedy. Proper enlightenment is based on nobility. W. David Sievers says in his book Freud on Broadway that "the insight happens to the audience."<sup>10</sup> This "insight" is not a prerequisite for the tragic hero. The nobility of the tragic hero must be revealed to the audience.

The blending of these ingredients will still not guarantee a successful tragedy. The difference between attempt and success lies within the spirit of the playwright. In the novel, for example, the genius of William Faulkner is evident in spite of his often mazy syntax. So in judging the parts of dramatic tragedy, we have to submit to the whole; the total effect is the lasting one. Now, in our search for tragedy in American drama, bearing in mind these fundamental concepts, we turn to specific examples of accomplishment.



## Close-Up--"The Men"

Three of the playwrights we are going to study were born in the same year--1888. Eugene O'Neill, Maxwell Anderson, and T. S. Eliot have this birth year in common. Each man has seen his world in terms of a high-powered philosophy. O'Neill professed pessimism, Anderson, stoicism, and Eliot, Anglo-Catholicism.

Eugene O'Neill's works, a prodigious outpouring, represent a tumultuous search to find an understanding of the tensions of the modern world and their effect upon the individual.

O'Neill has been America's most prolific dramatist. His most fertile years of creativity occurred in two contrasting decades. The twenties and the thirties were remarkable for the great "high" and "low" they represent in American civilization. O'Neill, a witness to this struggle for existence, saw the decadence of a fool's paradise.

It was in this period that a European intellectual stimulus offered a new comprehension of the individual in his complexity. Psychoanalysis gave birth to a new conception of individual motivation. Freud and Jung were making their mark upon an anxious civilization.

O'Neill has denied the influence of Freud, while admitting interest in Jung:

...I am no deep student of psychoanalysis. As far as I can remember, of all the books written by Freud, Jung, etc., I have read only four, and Jung is the only one of the lot who interests me. Some of his suggestions I find extraordinarily illuminating in the light of my own experience with hidden human motives.<sup>1</sup>

O'Neill did borrow such an obvious symbol as the mask from the world of psychology in order to dress and undress the motives of his characters.

The Great God Brown was written in 1925. It is a study of artistic will and the conflicting tension of society. The theme is not new, but the treatment is highly original. The two principal characters are Dion Anthony, the artist, and William A. Brown, the successful businessman. O'Neill describes the creation of Dion Anthony: "Dionysus and St. Anthony---the creative pagan acceptance of life, fighting eternal war with the masochistic, life-denying spirit of Christianity as represented by St. Anthony."<sup>2</sup> Dionysus represents the free-flowing, life-giving force, the prerequisite of the artist. This force, however, is walled-in by the severe "life-denying spirit" of Christianity. It is important that O'Neill sees Christianity as a destructive institution of modern society. William A. Brown is the tool of society. Brown's conformity is a means to his end.

Dion becomes the frustrated artist. He cannot find the answer to his life. He refers to Christianity as the crutch of society: "You infant blubbering in the dark, you!" His wife Margaret is the ideal picture of love and devotion. She champions her husband shamelessly and mothers him with the same breath. She calls him her "young man" and fights his depression: "But you can paint, Dion--beautifully!"

Like all artists, Dion is hypersensitive about the passage of time. He feels his artistic promise dying. Dion further corrupts his integrity by accepting a job offered by Brown.

In his compromising position, Dion feels his ignominious sacrifice: "I am thy shorn, bald, nude sheep! Lead on, Almighty Brown, thou Kindly Light!" This is Brown as he is seen by all the world. Brown is society's god, the fatted calf incarnate.

Dion turns to the soft comfort of Cybel, a prostitute, who sees through Dion's mask: "Stop acting. I hate ham fats." Dion finds a solace in Cybel that transcends the superficial love of his wife. He half-heartedly scolds Cybel, naming her truth: "Now you're becoming maternal, Miss Earth." He removes his mask before her, growing up to his new found sense of reality.

Dion collapses in the home of Brown with the diabolical statement: "My last will and testament! I leave Dion Anthony to William Brown--for him to love and obey--for him to become me--." In death Dion's real face is revealed, and Brown remarks: "So that's the poor weakling you really were! No wonder you hid! And I've always been afraid of you--yes, I'll confess it now, in awe of you!" Brown, society's hero, could not conquer Dion in life, but now he is able to assume Dion's lifeless mask and deceive Margaret.

Cybel recognizes Brown's new identity: "You are Dion Brown!" Brown is ironically shot impersonating Dion, the supposed murderer of William Brown. When the police ask for his name, Cybel replies: "Man!" Cybel, the Earth-Mother, knows that "There is only love." Justice is a hollow entity that slips through the fingers of man.

The play is often ambiguous and often ingenious. Cybel is the instrument of recognition. Dion, the tragic protagonist,

becomes aware of himself in her presence. It seems to me that the tragedy becomes anticlimactic after Dion's death. Brown's perverted love for Dion hurts the essence of the play. There are too many suggestive symbols which destroy the cohesion of the work. Dion sees through the perversion of society, but he becomes helpless.

The cathartic feeling is forced. O'Neill punches the audience with blatant statements. The symbolic declarations are annoying rather than helpful. The masks, an expressionistic technique, promise a stimulating insight, but become ludicrous through overuse. Nobility is lacking. Cybel is the only character who holds out any hope for man, but her awareness falls flat. The police captain listens to Cybel pronounce the word "Man!" and then asks: "How d'yuh spell it?" This cynical bitterness distorts the would-be tragedy.

Dion does not fulfill his role as tragic hero. He is too submissive. He has little more than an artistic temperament. He is too much of an inhibited artist to let dedication rule his life. He surrenders to the demands of society in his marriage and his job. The audience cannot respect Dion. Though the audience is granted insight, the cathartic process is stifled by the lack of nobility.

Mourning Becomes Electra brings us to the year 1931. This trilogy based on the Orestia by Aeschylus, takes place in a small New England seaport town in 1865-1866. The Trojan War is replaced by the Civil War. The Mannon family is a modern version of the

House of Atreus. O'Neill, however, has chosen to emphasize Lavinia, whose counterpart, Electra, plays a fairly brief role in the Orestia. The conflict in this play lies between the members of the Mannon family and their relationship to each other. There is a definite strangle-hold which is squeezing the life-blood out of the individuals in the family.

The approaching arrival of Brigadier-General Ezra Mannon sets the action into motion. His wife, Christine, and his daughter, Lavinia, await his arrival with fear and anticipation. Christine like Clytemnestra is having an affair with an outcast relation of the family, Captain Adam Brant. Lavinia is portrayed as a cold but sincere young woman, who has an extraordinary facial resemblance to her mother. She is intensely jealous of her mother, and there is a hatred between the two. Lavinia is waiting for release from her mother with the arrival of her father. Christine is waiting with her secret fear for the inevitable to take place.

The "Homecoming" is a violent expression of feeling. The tensions among the three finally explode in Ezra's death, perpetrated by Christine. Christine tries to grab a new security in Adam: "You'll never leave me now, Adam--for your ships or your sea or your naked Island girls--when I grow old and ugly!"

Lavinia knows the evil her mother has caused and will not be placated from achieving ultimate retribution. The death of Ezra Mannon has also killed a part of Lavinia. Lavinia, repulsed by her mother, tried to usurp her mother's place for her father's love. Jung has classified under the heading of the mother

archetype, the negative mother-complex, in which the daughter rebels against her mother and attains "lucidity, objectivity, and masculinity."<sup>3</sup>

Like Orestes, Orin, after an extended absence, returns home to mourn the death of his father. O'Neill has emphasized the strong relationship between mother and son. Christine feels that Orin belongs to her instead of to the Mannon family. Lavinia incites her brother by arousing his jealousy: "If you won't help me punish her, I hope you're not such a coward that you're willing to let her lover escape!" Orin's reaction is that of a lover: "You say Brant is her lover! If that's true, I'll hate her! I'll know she murdered Father then!" The perverted sexual implications spring into life during the moments of extreme emotional anguish. There is embedded in the background of the play a frustrated sexual drive that is revealed in the unnatural tension between the members of this family.

Retribution makes Lavinia stronger and destroys Orin. Orin obeys Lavinia's command to murder Adam. Lavinia rationalizes murder in the Mannon frame of mind: "You know it was justice." She has become her father and mother in one. Her code is the Mannon justification, and she has absorbed the responsibility for the protection of Orin.

In "The Haunted" Lavinia and Orin return from a long trip to the Orient. Lavinia's entire physical appearance has a striking resemblance to her mother. She has become physically desirable. Orin has become mentally and physically haggard. The weight of guilt has destroyed his mental balance.

Orin believes that this guilt should be shared. He confesses to Lavinia: "I love you now with all the guilt in me--the guilt we share! Perhaps I love you too much, Vinnie!" In this moment of emotional crisis, the question of sexual perversion once again rears its head.

In the Orestia, Orestes is pursued by the Eumenides as punishment for his matricide. Orestes is finally saved by the intervention of the supernatural. Orin's fate is irrevocable. He is pushed to suicide by his sister. And Lavinia, hoping to escape by her brother's death, cannot alter her fate. Finally she realizes her place. She enters the Mannon house and buries herself alive, alone with the Mannon dead: "I'm the last Mannon. I've got to punish myself!"

In many ways Mourning Becomes Electra is a momentous work. Its theme is befitting the highest tragedy. The difference between Aeschylus and O'Neill is that O'Neill does not pretend that he knows the answer. Aeschylus, in the Greek tradition, relied upon the gods for support. O'Neill, writing in a black depression, felt security crumbling beneath him. He felt that fate does not compromise. O'Neill retells the Orestia, presenting a real horror. Man is compelled to play his own little drama. The man who wishes, the man who hopes, is laughed at by the reigning powers. Disillusionment once again carves its niche in this O'Neill creation.

The protagonists, Lavinia and Orin, are powerful characters. Their resistance, endurance, and courage are heroic qualities. But the inherent evil living within them is squeezed out of them until they have completely expended themselves. O'Neill has

mercilessly probed the sickness of his characters. Lavinia, the last of the Mannons, returns to the womb of the cancer by closing herself up in the Mannon house. Lavinia is the strongest of all the characters. Orin and Lavinia are dedicated to fulfilling the gnawing retribution eating at their souls. Orin, however, is led on by the perverted love he feels for his mother. He accepts the terrifying responsibility for his mother's suicide and finally takes his own life. Lavinia has too much courage to commit suicide. It is she who accepts the total responsibility for the evil committed by the Mannon family. She achieves tragic dignity because she realizes that she cannot escape and because she has the strength to stop the contaminated Mannon blood from corrupting future generations.

Lavinia's awareness is transferred to the audience. The catharsis is justified. The passionate explosions bind the audience to the characters and also repel them at the same time. The spectator is able to feel himself involved in recognizing the universal characteristics of Lavinia and Orin and removed in understanding and appreciating the evil which has dominated and destroyed their lives.

The violence and shock are typical of the great tragedies of the past--Oedipus and King Lear. Retribution must take its exacting toll. The Mannon name embodies all the hate and frustration of misdirected love. All the characters are capable of love, which they must sacrifice. O'Neill stabs at the puritanical sense of justice that kills humanity. The cathartic process is able



to reach this completed understanding of the salacious, erotic drive that consumes the characters.

O'Neill is guilty of outdoing himself in this play. His constant use of the exclamation mark signifies his burning zeal to drive his point into the audience. Under less talented hands, this example of bad writing could easily become ludicrous. But O'Neill has created in Mourning Becomes Electra a unique example of tragedy in the twentieth century. This play is particularly representative of the American mood of despair in the thirties.

O'Neill's frightening knowledge of human perversion is artfully displayed in this trilogy. It is obvious when one compares this work with The Great God Brown that O'Neill had reached a new maturity as an artist. His blending of characterization and plot rises to a brilliant crescendo in his most violent moments and drops to a fine illumination with Lavinia's culminating resolution. In its surging power and overwhelming characterization, Mourning Becomes Electra attains the tragic height in spite of its high-strung, overly romantic language.

The Iceman Cometh was written at the end of the decade (1939), and the prevailing mood has mellowed. The characters have all given up their lives of hopeless desperation in order to degenerate quietly in Harry Hope's saloon.

Each individual has made his private break with the real world and has chosen to live in the world of illusion. Even in this squalid existence, the individuals are kept alive by waiting. Each man promises to make his return to the real world, but like Jimmy Tomorrow their dreams turn to tomorrow with every new day.

They are also waiting for the return of Hickey, who brings some spirit of cheer from the outside world.

The philosopher-king of the saloon is Larry Slade, a man of sixty, who has forsaken the anarchistic cause and completely removed himself from the world of action. He is an intelligent man who sees the weaknesses of those around him: "They've all a touching credulity concerning tomorrows. It'll be a great day for them, tomorrow--the Feast of All Fools, with brass bands playing!" This is O'Neill talking. The "Feast of All Fools" to which he alludes is the same fool's paradise that he saw his contemporaries living in. The Jimmy Tomorrow's are all the hopeful hopeless he knew, refusing to accept crass reality. And Larry Slade bears a close relationship to O'Neill, the man with insight, helpless in his impotency but condemned to witness the degeneration of humanity.

The disturbing element in the play is Hickey, who provides the impetus for the play's plot. Hickey, once a good time Charley, has turned reformer: "You'll have to excuse me, boys and girls, but I'm off the stuff. For keeps." Hickey symbolizes the modern day revivalist. His revival, however, destroys one false security for another. The peace of mind he claims from abstention is merely a ruse to hide his own feelings of guilt. A guilt complex can take many forms. Hickey has murdered his wife for not being unfaithful. He could not stand her eternal forgiveness for his own unfaithfulness.

Here is O'Neill's distrust of religion and its sickening altruistic quality. Hickey's wife is a Christ symbol whose golden purity provides a glowing front for a decaying interior. Hickey preaches the "righteous" gospel until chaos makes him admit: "I remember I heard myself speaking to her [his wife], as if it was something I'd always wanted to say: 'Well, you know what you can do with your pipe dream now, you damned bitch!'" According to O'Neill, Christianity is only another "pipe dream" which provides a doctrine for the blind.

O'Neill's mouthpiece Larry Slade is so disenchanted that his fervent hope is annihilation: "Life is too much for me! I'll be a weak fool looking with pity at the two sides of everything till the day I die! May that day come soon!" The philosopher-king knows too well the weakness of the philosopher. Larry is a prisoner of his own intellectual objectivity.

The philosophy in the play seems rather distorted. O'Neill seems unsure of himself. He offers little more than a cynical comment on the world as he sees it. The play is intangled with a lot of barbed statements that end in complexity. There is no illumination.

There is also no tragic hero. O'Neill surrenders characterization to philosophy. We miss the hard and penetrating insight in Mourning Becomes Electra. Instead we have a group of puppets mouthing their creator's disillusionment. The dialogue sticks out like a sore thumb. This time O'Neill does not transcend his inadequacy with language. The total effect does not hold the parts together. The potential for purgative emotion and rational under-

standing is there, but it does not speak distinctly because O'Neill's ultimate insight is without hope or stimulation..

John Mason Brown has given his summation of the art of Eugene O'Neill: "The altitude of his reach has been the measure of his magnitude and more outstanding than any of his plays."<sup>4</sup> The brilliance of Eugene O'Neill cannot be denied. In his intensity, however, he often lost his way as an artist and disregarded the prerequisite of tragedy "to create an independent logic by relating cause and effect where actual living is most frequently illogical."<sup>5</sup> In his best work, O'Neill is able to sustain his violent probing of the human character by adhering to sound artistic organization. Mourning Becomes Electra succeeds because Aeschylus's trilogy provides the pattern which O'Neill needs to accomplish the potential of tragedy which restlessly inhabits The Great God Brown and The Iceman Cometh but is not clearly defined.

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Maxwell Anderson, a stoic, believes in the dignity of man. William Van O'Connor explains Anderson's artistic philosophy: "... When the protagonist recognizes his 'flaw,' he must change his course and thus become noble and true to himself."<sup>6</sup> This is basically a traditional belief. It is traditional for the tragic hero to recognize his plight and "thus become noble and true to himself." This formula is neat and well-tested, but it can also be too glib an answer. Anderson's feeling for traditional form and logic contrasts sharply with the modernity of Winterset. John Gassner says that Anderson "does not even hesitate to arrange



relativism:

There's no guilt under heaven,  
just as there's no heaven, till men believe it--  
no earth, till men have seen it, and have a word  
to say this is the earth.

Miriamne cannot control her faith. She asks her learned father: "Is it better to tell a lie and live?" She has not lived long enough to understand the stoicism of her father.

Mio challenges the stoicism that surrounds the life of Miriamne, and she runs to him in all her innocence and trust and faith. Their love has a religious significance in its purity:

Why, girl, the transfiguration on the mount  
was nothing to your face. It lights from within--  
a white chalice holding fire, a flower in flame,  
this is your face.

Mio is a searcher for truth. He arrives believing that truth is justice--an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. He seeks those responsible for his father's death in order to fulfill the revenge that lies heavy on his heart. Here is Hamlet's driving purpose. And Miriamne, like Ophelia, sees the flicker of her lover's greatness.

They can take away so little  
with all their words. For you're a king among them.  
I heard you, and loved your voice.

Mio realizes through his love for Miriamne that truth and justice are mere words that do not convey the essence of life. Like the lovers Romeo and Juliet, Mio and Miriamne find the light of "morning."

I came here seeking  
light in darkness, running from the dawn,  
and stumbled on a morning.

This precious understanding of the young is too pure for a realistic world. Mio is ironically murdered by Trock. Miriamne takes her responsibility in love with all the serious compassion of the faithful. She accepts death and joins Mio. Esdra recognizes their courage:

Oh, Miriamne,  
and Mio--Mio, my son--know this where you lie,  
this is the glory of earthborn men and women,  
not to cringe, never to yield, but standing,  
take defeat implacable and defiant,  
die unsubmitting.

Anderson gives us his conception of an eternal truth that cannot be debased by a corruptible society. Love, therefore, dies in order to be reborn among all men. Still it is not always convincing. It is too easy. By reverting to a tried and true pattern, Anderson accentuates the contrast between the sixteenth century and the twentieth century. The complexity of O'Neill is missing. Perhaps O'Neill was not always successful in controlling this complexity, but he was not afraid to face it. Anderson is too ready to settle for pat answers. The "sweetness" of Mio and Miriamne is overdone. Instead of struggle and defeat and awareness born from pity and terror, we have a monument erected in the name of tragedy.

The characters never come alive as representatives of their own age. They tend to fall into hackneyed stereotypes that do little more than resemble their Shakespearean counterparts. Anderson tries to make words do the work for his characters. It is rather disturbing when his characters speak too eloquently. Mio, for example, who has not finished high school, is able to describe his life in rare, poetic terms:

Fell in with a fisherman's family on the coast and went after the beautiful mackerel fish that swim in the beautiful sea. Family of Greeks--Aristides Marinos was his lovely name. He sang while he fished. Made the pea-green Pacific ring with his bastard Greek chanties. Then I went to Hollywood High School for awhile.

His poetry can be effective when it is in keeping with character, but the fact that it is poetry often makes Anderson try too hard to make it "right."

The nobility of Winterset does not have an honest cathartic effect. The total effect would be melodramatic if Maxwell Anderson had less talent. It seems to me that Mr. Anderson is not willing enough to take notice of the handwriting on the wall. His stoicism prevents him from having tragic compassion and insight.

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We turn now to T. S. Eliot and his religious drama, Murder in the Cathedral, in order to examine its position as tragedy. The play was originally written for production at the Canterbury Festival in 1935.

His play focuses attention upon spiritual crisis in the life of Archbishop Thomas Becket. He uses a chorus for philosophical comment on the action of the play in the classical tradition. The action of the play is mental rather than physical. The drama opens on the occasion of the Archbishop's return to Canterbury. There is a conflicting mood of fear and rejoicing in the air. The chorus of women cry out their premonition:

Thomas Archbishop, set the whitesail between  
the grey sky and the bitter sea, leave us, leave us,  
for France.



Becket appears and notes the passion of the chorus: "They know and do not know, what it is to act or suffer." The voice of the chorus transcends understanding; it speaks of a truth beyond reason.

Four Tempters come to visit Becket and offer their gifts. The first three Tempters are familiar to Thomas; he has been guilty of heeding their call before. The Fourth Tempter, however, is a stranger who tries to appeal to the power of the Archbishop, the natural power that threatens all clergymen:

You hold the keys of heaven and hell.  
Power to bind and loose: bind, Thomas, bind,  
King and bishop under your heel.

Thomas admits: "I have thought of these things." The intrigue of this temptation is beguiling. Thomas asks: "Who are you, tempting with my own desires?" The Tempter answers Thomas with the same words Thomas used reflecting upon the speech of the chorus: "You know and do not know, what it is to act or suffer." These same words are used purposely to influence, to lead Thomas toward the path of damnation in the guise of honest, religious contemplation. But Thomas is too strong to succumb. He articulates the evil of the Fourth Tempter:

The last temptation is the greatest treason:  
To do the right deed for the wrong reason...  
For those who serve the greater cause may make  
the cause serve them...

In the middle of the play, on Christmas morning in the year 1170, the Archbishop gives a sermon. The question he asks his congregation is the inherent paradox of Christianity: "For who in the World will both mourn and rejoice at once and for the same

reason?" He answers his query in the words of the Lord: "'Not as the world gives, give I unto you.'" That is, "He gave to His disciples peace, but not peace as the World gives." He concludes his sermon by defining the role of the Christian martyr: "A martyr, a saint, is always made by the design of God...."

Thomas is murdered by the Four Knights and becomes the martyr he has defined. After the murder, the knights make their individual, rational apologies: "Unhappily, there are times when violence is the only way in which social justice can be secured." One is reminded of the rational apology made by Brutus to the people after Caesar's death in the Shakespearean drama.

The chorus sums up Eliot's theme:

We thank Thee for Thy mercies of blood, for  
Thy redemption by blood. For the blood of Thy  
martyrs and saints.

Becket's weakness is the sin of pride; his glory is martyrdom. Shaw's famous line in The Devil's Disciple: "Martyrdom, sir, is what these people like," reveals the line which Murder in the Cathedral crosses. Unless martyrdom is viewed on a religious level, it becomes the propaganda of cause.

Becket is, in the secular sense, an escapist. He gives himself up to the Lord. He accepts this answer. But he also is able to avoid the struggle of this world, yet achieve a martyr's fame in this world.

John Gassner points out:

The modern theatre has been predominantly  
the resultant of the forces of Protestantism,  
democracy, rationalism, materialism, and science....

Gassner claims that Eliot "strenuously opposed each of the fetishes of these modernists and their successors as a playwright as well as a poet and essayist."<sup>7</sup> Eliot's values are quite alien to most of our society, which looks to self-will as its greatest asset.

The figure of Thomas Becket is so much a part of the past that the modern audience, unless indoctrinated, has trouble feeling the appropriate identification with the tragic hero. There is a force in this play that brings out a great deal of latent emotion. It is in the realm of a mystical emotion, however, which has no room for reason's plausibility. The catharsis in this play is purely a religious one.

The play is artfully composed and tastefully respectable. It is a beautiful symbol of religious experience. The language is so melodious that even the least subtle spectator is swayed by its lyrical quality. Murder in the Cathedral, however, is not tragedy. It is not tragedy, not because it has a religious theme, the greatest Greek tragedies were religious, but because religion squeezes the life out of the play. The characters are tools used by Eliot to dramatize his belief. It is a sincere piece of work, but it cannot compete with tragedy which reaffirms life on earth.

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"The Boys"

Among the younger playwrights, two stand out in any theatrical billing--Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller. Williams was born in 1914 and Miller in 1916. The fact that they stand head and shoulders above their contemporaries is a decisive comment on the lack of young talent willing and able to write tragedy.

The play which catapulted Tennessee Williams into fame was The Glass Menagerie, which was produced in 1945. Williams calls this play a "memory play" because of its theme and expressionistic technique. Williams explains:

There is only one important difference between the original and acting version of the play and that is the omission in the latter of the device which I tentatively included in my original script. This device was the use of a screen on which were projected magic-lantern slides bearing images or titles.<sup>8</sup>

Williams also emphasized the use of a "single recurring tune" and unrealistic lighting in order to give his play the special mood he desires.

The play dramatizes the relationship of three family characters, the Wingfields. Tom, the son, acts as the narrator of the play as well as the poet locked in by society. Tom begins by setting the scene for the audience:

To begin with, I turn back time. I reverse it to that period, the thirties, when the huge middle class of America was matriculating in a school for the blind.

We know that Williams is speaking about the period in which he grew up, for he too was a poet working at odd jobs trying to realize his individuality in the thirties.

Security plays a muted theme. The Wingfields are a fatherless family. Mr. Wingfield had the wander-lust: One day he left, never to be seen again. Amanda, the mother, is a Southern belle misplaced. She cannot hide the disillusionment of her dreams and devotes her attention to her daughter Laura. Laura is a helpless individual, crippled in one leg, who cannot cope with reality. She is only at home in the world of her glass animals, in their fragile delicacy she finds the secret joy of the lonely.

Amanda wants her children to be well settled. The irony of her desire, of course, is that she herself is "bewildered by life." She cannot understand why her daughter is not courted by the most eligible bachelors in town. After all, she was. She constantly remembers her own childhood, a childhood of sheltered security.

Enter Jim O'Connor. O'Connor tries to draw Laura out of her shell by instilling confidence in her. "You're--pretty!" he says. He analyzes her condition as an "inferiority complex." Jim even tries to teach her to dance. While dancing, one of her glass animals, a unicorn, falls and breaks its horn. Laura says: "Now he will feel more at home with the other horses, the ones that don't have horns...." The symbolism is obvious. Laura is beginning to feel and enjoy the acceptance of reality.

Laura's sky-blue hopes suddenly turn inky and overcast as Jim announces: "Laura, I've--been going steady!" Amanda blames her son for not knowing that O'Connor was serious with another girl: "You don't know things anywhere! You live in a dream; you

manufacture illusions!" The irony of the statement is that its bitter condemnation is a perfect description of Amanda's own unawareness.

The play closes on a poignant note. The figure of Amanda is seen comforting her daughter. We cannot hear her words, but as Williams says "her silliness is gone and she has dignity and tragic beauty."

A new awareness envelops the play in the last scene. The three lost figures realize that they cannot escape. Tom says: "Oh, Laura, Laura, I tried to leave you behind me, but I am more faithful than I intended to be!" It is also significant that Tom's remark "nowadays the world is lit by lightning! Blow out your candles, Laura....," is followed by Laura's action of blowing out the candles. The candles symbolize the past, and in the dawn of their new understanding there is no need for them. The new dawn, however, is rather brutal. The word "lightning" suggests the violence of the new age.

The figure of Laura haunts the play. She undergoes the biggest change in character as she is brought out of her dream world. She is touched by the eternal hope that all men wait for in the character of Jim O'Connor. He offers her new life. It is fitting for the tragic mood that O'Connor plays such a brief but vital role. In contrast to O'Neill's The Iceman Cometh, Williams does find an honest hope in reality. But he also recognizes the confusion and complexity that make it so difficult to accept the new world. Amanda says: "Some people say that science clears up all the mysteries for us. In my opinion it only creates more!"

In The Glass Menagerie, Williams does not force his characters on us. Sometimes they almost seem subordinated to an inevitable course of action. Although the characters are more subdued than in most Williams plays, they play their parts with an inner force that keeps the play from slipping into sentimental melodrama. The quiet and humble recognition scene at the end, though not shocking, is effective and in keeping with the play's general tone.

Though finely drawn, The Glass Menagerie never becomes real tragedy. In fairness to Mr. Williams, he probably never intended it to be more than a "memory play." It is not tragedy because it lacks a tragic hero. There is no character who has the spiritual integrity necessary to be called a hero. None of the characters reaches the height of nobility that can arouse our admiration. Even in the artistically beautiful recognition scene, the characters remain too wistful to engage the audience in a condition of sympathy.

A Streetcar Named Desire opened on Broadway in December 1947. There is a greater outer reality in this play than in The Glass Menagerie. Williams has combined sensual naturalism and New Orleans color to give his play its gaudy dress.

Blanche DuBois goes to visit her sister Stella. There is an obvious contrast between these two women and their environment. They are both of a gentle and delicate nature. Blanche, however, is the more sensitive and flighty of the two. The first inkling we have of Blanche's neurotic nature is her secret drinking in her sister's empty apartment: "I've got to get hold of myself!" When her sister enters the room, Blanche begins to chatter on and

on, telling her sister not to look at her until she has "bathed and rested!" We see that Stella is the more submissive of the two; she waits on Blanche in a dutiful and joyful way.

Stanley Kowalski is a striking counterpoint to Blanche. He is a powerful character, full of animal magnetism. Stella tells Blanche that Stanley is "A different species." From their first meeting, there is a smoldering hostility between Stanley and Blanche, waiting to burst into flame. Stanley tries to expose Blanche by accusing her of stealing Stella's money from the sale of Belle Reve, the DuBois family home.

Blanche bears a definite grudge toward her sister. The center of the grudge is Belle Reve, which Blanche has lost possession of because of an unpaid mortgage: "Yes, accuse me! Sit there and stare at me, thinking I let the place go! I let the place go? Where were you! In bed with your--Polack!"

As in The Glass Menagerie, there is a character of hope. Harold Mitchell replaces Jim O'Connor. Mitch is strong physically but quite sensitive. He is attracted to Blanche. Mitch has another strong attraction and obligation toward his mother, a dying invalid. Blanche recognizes this sensitiveness in Mitch and tries to nurture it. Here we see that Blanche is a strong woman in her own way. She feels that she can help Mitch by appreciating him. For Blanche, Mitch is a chance to build a new life, and for Mitch, Blanche holds the promise of continuing affection after his mother's death.

There are, however, certain hard, even brutal facts which must be faced. It is the realization of these facts that makes



the melodramatic setting turn into violent reality. The hidden past that Blanche has tried to avoid, suddenly comes bursting into sight. It is Stanley's personal vengeance to strip Blanche's mask away. He uncovers the sordid details of her whoring and seducing a high school boy. This is Stanley's triumph--to let the world know that the little rich girl has dirty hands. Stanley tells his own wife:

When we first met, me and you, you thought I was common. How right you was, baby. I was common as dirt. You showed me the snapshot of the place with the columns. I pulled you down off them columns and how you loved it....

The life and death symbols are neatly brought into focus by Williams. While Stella is at the hospital giving birth to her child, Stanley takes advantage of the opportunity to rape Blanche: "We've had this date with each other from the beginning!" The contrast between the birth of his child and the "death" of Blanche has a raw and shocking impact. Blanche retreats to the world of grandiose dreams. Turned down and insulted by Mitch, violated by her brother-in-law, she has been pushed into a blindness from which there is no escape.

Williams has vividly depicted the sweat of life and the conflict between violence and tradition. Blanche is afraid to face the glare of a naked light bulb. She buys Chinese lanterns to cover up the light bulbs in her sister's apartment. Before the rape scene, she calls Western Union and repeats this message: "In desperate, desperate circumstances! Help me! Caught in a trap...." Blanche, the upholder of tradition, is doomed as a victim of Stanley, the force of violence.

The sex drive is dragged into the open in this play; its domination is carefully examined in the lives of the characters. The question of sexual security is a prominent theme. In the marital relationship of Stella and Stanley, there is satisfaction. As Stella comments to her sister: "But there are things that happen between a man and a woman in the dark--that sort of make everything else seem--unimportant."

Blanche has been denied this contentment. Her frustration is obvious. She needs to be loved and desired by one man, but since the death of her youthful husband, she has searched in vain. Blanche's security has been ripped away by death, and she does not have the strength of will to carry on any longer. Elia Kazan, the director of the play, has said: "We are shown the final dissolution of a person of worth, who once had great potential, and who, even as she goes down, has worth exceeding that of the 'healthy,' coarse-grained figures who kill her."<sup>9</sup>

One might call Stanley Blanche's antagonist. He is the cock of the walk, almost a living phallic symbol. He possesses the sexual gratification that Blanche needs, but only the sexual gratification. Even in her frustration, Blanche feels pity and superiority over her sister for giving in to such a low-class character: "In this dark march toward whatever it is we're approaching...Don't hang back with the brutes!"

The glory of this play in its conflict between good and evil is resolved, it seems to me, in the martyrdom of Blanche. Blanche is a worldly martyr who has sacrificed her life for the illumination of others. Stella's uncontrollable weeping at the end of

the play is a sign of awareness caused by the loss of her sister and the realization of her own plight.

The streetcar named Desire has carried an angel of mercy to Elysian Fields. Blanche is a great deal more of a person than Amanda; she has tragic intensity, if not tragic insight. The pit of blackness into which she falls is symptomatic of our age. The obviousness of her own dilemma keeps her from understanding herself; she is too much a part of it.

Blanche goes down to defeat holding on to an ethical standard she believes to be righteous. This does not excuse the hypocrisy of her own life. She rationalizes this hypocrisy in her own mind, which shows that she is aware of it. Blanche is "caught in a trap" because she is held fast in a whirlpool of overwhelming forces, forces that have buried so much of tradition and destroyed the walls of the sheltered. Stella has come from behind the walls to find security in the protective masculinity of Stanley. Blanche has expended herself trying to rebuild the walls. The strength of her character cannot be denied. Her superficialities mask a woman of nobility. The tragedy of her appeal is left to the audience.

The spectator, sitting removed from the action, is able to understand the emotions of pity and fear through identification with the heroine. In A Streetcar Named Desire, Tennessee Williams has created a contemporary tragedy in which "The blind are-- leading the blind!" He has dramatized the disease that threatens the growth of our civilization--ignorance.

Williams realizes that modern man often loses sight of the fundamentals because of the myriad complexities that are bandied like toys before the unsuspecting individual. This is our peculiar labyrinth. If Blanche does not receive Aristotelian insight, she is still justified as a tragic heroine. The audience receives the proper insight. Just as the aristocracy has bowed to the middle-class, so Aristotle's formula must be modified by contemporary tension.

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Arthur Miller reached the apex of his success with Death of a Salesman, which was produced in New York some fifteen months after A Streetcar Named Desire. There is a concentration in realism in Miller's play that shakes one out of the Southern atmosphere that belongs to Tennessee Williams. The Loman family has the immediacy of someone we know, not necessarily a Northern characteristic but rather a part of the hustle and bustle, the day-to-day struggle for existence.

Willy Loman, a middle-class salesman, is consumed by dreams of glory. He has tried to pass these dreams on to his sons, to give them confidence in their "superior ability." Willy is sincere in his belief that there is a way to win. After all, his brother Ben found the answer: "Why boys, when I was seventeen I walked into the jungle, and when I was twenty-one I walked out. And by God I was rich."

The boys, Biff and Happy, grow up in Willy's world of make believe. Their sudden maturity is a bitter experience. They have to learn life's lessons the hard way. Biff, an outstanding

high school athlete, was lauded by his contemporaries and kept swinging on air by his own family.

Although Willy instilled confidence in his sons, it was a ruthless confidence without regard for the mediocre. Willy and his sons have good-humored contempt for his wife's brother Charley, a successful businessman, and his son Bernard, an excellent student. Biff uses Bernard as a math tutor, and Willy insults Charley and borrows money from him. A leak appears in Willy's planning: Biff has a weakness for taking things that he wants very much.

Linda is an almost unbelievably good person. She is devoted to her husband even in the recognition of his weakness. Miller has described her character in his introduction to the play:

She more than loves him, she admires him, as though his mercurial nature, his temper, his massive dreams and little cruelties, served her only as sharp reminders of the turbulent longings within him, longings which she shares but lacks the temperament to utter and follow to their end.

Miller has consciously created her character for the point of revelation he wishes to convey to the audience. She above all people believes in the goodness of her husband. She is quick to reprimand her sons when they turn against him:

He's not the finest character that ever lived. But he's a human being, and terrible thing is happening to him. So attention must be paid. He's not to be allowed to fall into his grave like an old dog. Attention, attention must be finally paid to such a person.

The "terrible thing" that is happening to Willy is that his dream is falling apart. Willy always knew his limitations as a salesman, but he could not convince himself that it would not pay

off someday. He continues to live in hope as things pass from bad to worse. Willy's dual role becomes harder and harder to play. When his children were young, he was their hero; his motto was the golden word: "Be liked and you will never want." Sometimes, however, he cannot dupe himself and must pour out his anguish to his wife:

I'm fat. I'm very--foolish to look at, Linda. I didn't tell you, but Christmas time I happened to be calling on F. H. Stewarts, and a salesman I know, as I was going in to see the buyer I heard him say something about--walrus. And I--I cracked him right across the face, I won't take that. I simply will not take that. But they do laugh at me. I know that.

This admission is like coughing up blood for Willy. He vomits his weakness, then pulls up his courage: "I gotta overcome it... I'm not dressing to advantage, maybe." Like a battered fighter, he will not take the long count. Willy does not know how to lose.

The recognition of failure is a nauseating experience. Willy cannot endure the torture of reality. Behind Willy's crippled hope, there lies a deadly fear. Willy is a potential suicide case. He keeps a rubber hose hidden in the basement, and his wife knows. She does not have the courage to confront her husband with the humiliation of her knowledge.

Willy returns one evening to plant vegetables in his garden, to produce something by himself that will not be corrupted by human weakness. And Willy suddenly decides upon a course of action that looks like a way out, a way to finally make his dreams pay off:

Oh, Ben, that's the whole beauty of it! I see it like a diamond, shining in the dark, hard and rough, that I can pick up and touch in my hand ...he thinks I'm nothing, see, and so he spites me. But the funeral--Ben, that funeral will be massive.

He believes that his insurance pay-off will complete his dream. And so he walks out into the darkened street to sacrifice his life to an oncoming car.

At the funeral, Linda naively wonders: "Why didn't anybody come?" Biff sums up his disillusionment: "He had all the wrong dreams... He never knew who he was."

There is something in the character of Willy Loman that is not so far removed from Blanche DuBois. Both cling fast to noble dreams, both are afraid. Neither can face the life that deviates from their dreams. Both are condemned to impotent hope. In another sense their dreams are vicious; their dreams are also kindled by pride and vanity. But of the two, Willy is the less admirable character. Blanche may not be as realistic as Willy, but she has a purity that Willy lacks.

In spite of Linda's comments, Willy is still too much a part of the norm to rise above the drudgery of his life. We do not admire Willy for his suicidal wish. Blanche is more courageous because she goes down with the tradition that she loves. Of the two, Willy is the greater prostitute. He gives himself up to the tangible and material measure of success.

Linda, speaking for Miller, contends that "A small man can be just as exhausted as a great man." This, however, is no excuse. It recalls the greater lines of Shakespeare in Henry IV, Part 2:

Wilt thou, O partial sleep, give thy repose  
To the wet sea-boy in an hour so rude;  
And in the calmest and most stillest night,  
With all appliances and means to boot,  
Deny it to a king? Then, happy low, lie down!  
Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown.

Willy, though a vivid and extremely moving character, commands our sympathy but nothing higher. Miller does not give us an affirmation of life. His attempt at poetic diction and dream technique cannot disguise the naturalism of the play. If Miller is pointing his finger "at the enemy of man's freedom," then he is condemning the "little man" to a life of oblivion. Man's inhumanity to man will continue to exist until the Utopia. Miller defeats his own purpose by limiting his attention to the "little man." By "little man" I refer to spirit, not occupation.

The acceptance of responsibility is one test of greatness. We saw it in O'Neill's *Lavinia*, Williams's *Blanche*, and even in Anderson's *Mio and Miriamne*. Willy shirks his responsibility to his family; he is an egoist without a crown. His dreams of greatness are based on false idealism. He is not a Brutus, whose altruism and egoism were greater than his ability, but who still was "the noblest Roman of them all." Willy Loman's terrible inadequacy does not make him a fit subject for tragedy.

Miller's social conscience again comes to life in The Crucible, which met with much popular success in the 1952-53 season. The action of the play takes place in Salem, Massachusetts, in the year 1692. Miller describes the paradox of the "Salem tragedy" in an introduction to the play:

It is a paradox in whose grip we still live, and there is no prospect yet that we will discover its resolution...the people of Salem developed a theocracy, a combine of state and religious power whose function was to keep the community together, and to prevent any kind of disunity that might open it to destruction by material or ideological enemies...



The witch-hunt was a perverse manifestation of the panic which set in among all classes when the balance began to turn toward greater individual freedom.

Reverend Parris, the religious leader of Salem, faces the threat of the dissemination of "unnatural powers" among the people of Salem. He is afraid.

Parris calls in an expert in "unnatural causes," Reverend Hale of nearby Beverly. Miller has created Hale as "the specialist whose unique knowledge has at last been publicly called for." Hale is clearly the intellectual whose learning should enable him to clear the air of guilt and to establish the order of truth and justice again. Hale, however, trying to uncover the Devil, succeeds only in alarming the whole town.

A general court is solicited and wide-spread arrests are made. Among the court's victims are John Proctor and his wife Elizabeth. Proctor has been caught in a trap of vengeance instigated by Abigail Williams, the niece of Reverend Parris. She is a vicious girl who has tempted Proctor to a single unfaithfulness to his wife. Since that day, Proctor has lived as a condemned man, condemned by his wife, who discovered his unfaithfulness, and persecuted by Abigail.

Abigail's wish is the death of Elizabeth. Abigail's frustrated desires are clearly evident in her wild scheming and violent, irresponsible actions. Elizabeth's puritanical standards force her to refuse her husband's love. The sex theme is really the driving force of the play.

In this cold, exacting situation, the Salem witch trials have a likely target for exploitation. Proctor and his wife are convicted. Proctor is reunited with his wife shortly before his death. At this meeting Elizabeth lifts her tight-lipped, puritanical veil:

John, I counted myself so plain, so poorly made, no honest love could come to me! Suspicion kissed you when I did; I never knew how I should say my love. It were a cold house I kept!

Emotionally moved by his wife's frankness, Proctor is willing to compromise his principles and cry out for life, but he finally rises above this temptation and refuses to sign a public statement of falsehood:

I have confessed myself! Is there no good penitence but it be public? God does not need my name nailed upon the church! God sees my name; God knows how black my sins are!

The principle of The Self wins out. Life is of no value to Proctor without self-dignity.

Miller adds a postscript to his play:

Not long after the fever died, Parris was voted from office...

The legend has it that Abigail turned up later as a prostitute in Boston.

Twenty years after the last execution, the government awarded compensation to the victims still living, and to the families of the dead...

To all intents and purposes, the power of theocracy in Massachusetts was broken.

This is a fitting end to the melodrama that Arthur Miller has written. Miller has written a good melodrama, not a tragedy. It is interesting to note, as Miller tells us, that "The fate of each character is exactly that of his historical model, and there

is no one in the drama who did not play a similar--and in some cases exactly the same--role in history." The events of the play are striking and sensational. The Salem witch hunt has the sticky familiarity of such contemporary spectacles as the McCarthy hearings and the Castro trials. There is poetic justice in history according to Miller's notes.

Arthur Miller has used history as a means to universalize certain social issues that threaten the strength of democracy. The real villain in The Crucible is the insensate obligation of blind justice. The real horror of the play is that a man like the Governor Deputy believes his decisions to be justified when they are based entirely on the evidence of an eighteen-year-old girl's whims. The Governor Deputy says to Proctor that he cannot accept his public confession if it is a lie: "Is that document a lie? If it is a lie I will not accept it." The irony of the law is herein stated. He will accept anything which cannot be denied. The Governor Deputy is a helpless tool in the hands of an absolute justice.

The triumph of individual freedom, the hero of the drama, is Miller's major theme. He has made this issue the backbone of his creation. Because he has chosen to illustrate a social and political crisis, he has necessarily foresaken the personal quality needed for tragedy. His characters become frames upon which to hang his prejudices. There is no getting around it. Playwright Miller has written a piece of propaganda. As he himself admits, he seriously questions the right of democracy to encroach upon one's

moral freedom. Such an ethical concern is certainly noble in itself, but when it dominates characterization, the play cannot cross into the realm of tragedy.

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## Values and Considerations

The playwrights we have discussed have exposed the forces of corruption with which they are most familiar. It is necessary for our writers of tragedy to be aware of the hidden elements lurking in our society. These elements affect the motivations of human beings in their day-to-day existence.

Our most esteemed institutions have received sharp criticism from our leading playwrights. The answers given to our civilization have been attacked for their glibness. Eugene O'Neill felt that Christianity was a stifling force repressing our society. He presents Dion Anthony as an example of one made impotent by Christianity. Hickey is an example of one who has come under the glossy outward badge of Christianity that gives him license to preach "the doctrine" of salvation. O'Neill knew from bitter experience that "holy" causes represent mere appearances. What he found under the appearance was not a pretty sight. I believe that O'Neill objected to Christianity for its "easy" answer, an answer which he spent his life trying to find.

There is a prevailing criticism of society's justice. O'Neill challenged the right of justice to murder love. The severe retribution that destroyed the Mannon family was the perverted outlet for inhibited love. Cybel speaks against the crude duty that justice is obliged to fulfill, ignoring human passions. Justice seems to dry out O'Neill's characters and leave them like Larry Slade, too aware of man's failings to act. Maxwell Anderson

probes the results of justice. Justice is symbolized by Judge Gaunt in Winterset, a half-crazed man whose mind has become poisoned by the rationalization he has to live with. Mio, in pursuit of justice, surrenders to the more powerful force of love. Arthur Miller turns cynical eyes toward justice and condemns its blind practice especially under the sanctification of democracy. Proctor's refusal to compromise recalls Lovelace's lines: "I could not love thee, dear, so much, / Loved I not honor more."

One theme that haunts modern drama is the search for security. This expresses the desire of our age. Dion Anthony is pushed out into the world by an ambitious society and made to compete according to its standards. Society will not leave the artist alone. Tom Wingfield is chained to a factory job. Society demands conformity. Dion succumbs and remains frustrated; Tom goes abroad and remains frustrated. Our tragedians are conscious that there really is no security. Security is an illusion, a dream which keeps the middle class planning all their lives.

The best playwrights do not offer an answer. They truthfully cannot. They, too, are victims in the universal rat-race. Their contribution is that they can see just a little bit more clearly and fully the situation we face. The term "anxiety" has meaning for them in their individual interpretations. Although, Arthur Miller, is from the North and Tennessee Williams is from the South, they both describe the same feeling of unrest and disenchantment. Miller has described what he calls "prophetic theater,"

and what I call the elements needed for the dramatization of universal tragedy:

...a play seriously meant for people of common sense, and relevant to both their domestic lives and their daily work, but an experience which widens their awareness of connection--the filaments to the past and the future which lie concealed in 'life.'<sup>1</sup>

Our playwrights are above all conscious of the lives of the individuals suffering around them. The human being involved in this world, unable to triumph against his overwhelming destiny, is the tragic struggle. The ancients saw this destiny as Fate; the Elizabethans awoke to the inevitable, personal weakness or "tragic flaw." Contemporary civilization has become conscious of a dominant society which causes men to become "other-directed." Whatever its title, tragic writers have always been aware of a destructive force to which all men are susceptible.

The modern tragic writer, however, has realized that though men are terribly weak, "they're the best thing you're ever likely to discover...." Frank O'Connor has said: "I don't believe there's anything else in the world except human beings...."<sup>2</sup> The human element is indeed the essential value of tragedy.

There can be no modern tragedy unless the author believes in human beings and their potential. It is almost a universal acknowledgment that a tragic hero must live according to his dreams. It is his dreams that transcend man-made justice. Dreams are food for the disillusioned in O'Neill's plays. They become a form of intoxication for his lost souls. Dreams become a bridge for Tennessee Williams's faded women. Williams uses dreams as a link

with the past, a past which has become extinct in the modern world. His bewildered characters cling to their dreams, unable to accept the change that inhabits their lives. Willy Loman removes himself from the penny-hungry world by his dreams of success. His brother Ben symbolizes the culmination of his dreams. Willy withdraws from the realities around him, protected by his suicidal desires.

The playwright's faith in the individual is spiritual but tangible. The tragic hero cannot escape. The false values pinned to his entity by a parasitic society must be outgrown. Lavinia in Mourning Becomes Electra and Blanche DuBois in A Streetcar Named Desire are examples of heroines who rise above the evil that surrounds them. Neither character dies, but both endure a living death. They are able to accept their punishment without running away. Endurance is the quality that arouses our admiration. Suffering is a natural human condition, but it is also a test of human character.

T. S. Eliot has stated a paradox which can be applied to tragedy. The combination of "mourning" and "rejoicing" is the spiritual value of tragedy. The audience mourns the disintegration of the hero and rejoices because his "death" has not been in vain. Actual death does not have to take place, but the hero must be physically destroyed. The rejoicing is a part of the catharsis. It is the fulfillment which comes from the understanding of our situation, of who we are, that culminates in our affirmation of life.

The playwright's purpose is to give man's potential a meaning. Pathos is not enough, it merely describes despair. Catharsis does



not create a false hope; rather it illuminates through the powers of imagination a universal order based on cause and effect. It sharpens our focus by broadening it through the inductive method. The artist does not have to solve any problem in tragedy, but he must be aware of man's virtue and present it in an intellectual and revealing way. This is the real hope of tragedy.

I must admit that this paper is more appreciative than critical, but it is so because I am a reader rather than a critic. It is written with the sincere belief that the individual is the ultimate glory of all tragedy. Each playwright discussed has been a searcher like myself. Eugene O'Neill died a searcher; T. S. Eliot has found his contentment. But they all began by trying to put the raw elements together in some sort of recognizable pattern. This has been the objective of this paper. It is "at this point [that] our argument arrives at an impasse, for we arrive at the 'dead end' of what we ourselves are, and to expect us to change our vote is to expect us to change ourselves."<sup>3</sup>

Although we may disagree on the particular merits of Eugene O'Neill, Maxwell Anderson, T. S. Eliot, Tennessee Williams, and Arthur Miller, if we continue to believe in ourselves, we can be sure that the new writers of tragedy are only a moment away.

## Notes

## Preface:

<sup>1</sup> Walter Kerr, "Theater," The New York Herald Tribune, September 6, 1959, drama section.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Eric Bentley, In Search of Theater, New York: Vintage Books, Inc., 1953, p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 220.

## Introduction:

<sup>1</sup> Karl Jaspers, Tragedy Is Not Enough, Boston: The Beacon Press, 1952, p. 17.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Introduction to A Woman Killed With Kindness, New York: Harper and Brothers, 1949, p. 365.

<sup>4</sup> Arthur Miller, Collected Plays, Introduction, New York: The Viking Press, 1957, p. 31.

<sup>5</sup> Arthur Miller, "Tragedy and the Common Man," Theatre Arts, XXXV, March 1951, p. 48.

<sup>6</sup> William Van O'Connor, Climates of Tragedy, Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 1943, p. 4.

<sup>7</sup> Miller, "Tragedy and the Common Man, p. 50.

<sup>8</sup> John Mason Brown, "American Tragedy," Saturday Review of Literature, XXXII, August 6, 1949, p. 126.

## Part Two--Comparison and Contrast:

<sup>1</sup> Aristotle, Poetics, translated by Richard McKeon, New York: Random House, The Modern Library, 1947, p. 631.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 633

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 632.

<sup>5</sup> Ashley H. Thorndike, Tragedy, Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company., 1908, p. 8.

<sup>6</sup> Henry A. Myers, Tragedy: A View of Life, Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1956, p. 34.

<sup>7</sup> Alan R. Thompson, The Anatomy of Drama, Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1942, p. 253.

<sup>8</sup> Maxwell Anderson, Winterset, Preface, Washington: Anderson House, 1935, p. ix.

<sup>9</sup> Miller, Collected Plays, p. 8.

<sup>10</sup> W. David Sievers, Freud On Broadway, New York: Hermitage House, 1955, p. 380.

Close-Up:

<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 97

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 109.

<sup>3</sup> C. G. Jung, The Basic Writings of C. G. Jung, New York: Random House, The Modern Library, 1959, p. 350.

<sup>4</sup> Brown, "American Tragedy," p. 125.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 126.

<sup>6</sup> O'Connor, Climates of Tragedy, p. 142.

<sup>7</sup> John Gassner, The Theatre In Our Times, New York: Crown Publishers, 1954, p. 234.

<sup>8</sup> Tennessee Williams, The Glass Menagerie, New York: Random House, The Modern Library, 1951, p. 273.

<sup>9</sup> Sievers, Freud On Broadway, p. 379.

Values and Considerations:

<sup>1</sup> Miller, Collected Plays, pp. 16-17.

<sup>2</sup> Frank O'Connor, Writers At Work, edited by Malcolm Cowley, New York: The Viking Press, 1958, pp. 176-77.

<sup>3</sup> Gassner, The Theatre In Our Times, p. 348.

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