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On Tragedy

by Pat De Young Weaver

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This essay deals primarily with the following kind of tragedy: An aesthetic acting-out-event which seriously probes the experience of deserved-yet-undeserved suffering. Though certainly incomplete, that description can be used as a kind of definition. A few introductory paragraphs will sketch out the way this definition can be made to account for traditional concept-tags such as "tragic flaw" and "the fall of a noble hero," and how it may also serve as a rule of thumb against which tragedies as culturally diverse as Antigone and A Doll's House can be "judged."

Perhaps long ago an individual man or woman could feel like an important piece of some cosmic/human puzzle rather than (having been handed all the wrong pieces) like the butt of a bad joke. Ordinary Greek citizens and sixteenth century

English merchants did not, of course, think of themselves as princes. But each had his part and task in a meaningful pattern of life, whether the whole was called polis or nation, and the King was head of the whole body as ordained by the gods or God. Thus the tragic fall of an Oedipus or a Richard II shook every man by shaking the whole edifice, and at the same time this fall of a king, a representative head, was the most powerful concrete symbol of the tragic experiences of any man's life. Or so it seems when we study the tragedies of Sophocles and Shakespeare in their historical and cultural contexts.

Now we also study Eugene O'Neill and Samuel Beckett. This century it seems that life for many people is a frustrated, aimless functioning in the presence of some inscrutable machine. Just being human makes the massive robot an enemy, but at the same time a human must function as a cog in the machine, or at least as a producer-consumer. Dry-eyed realists agree that some unstructured "brotherhood" of men is wishful thinking, and so it is possible that any man's tragedy does not concretely symbolize any other man's tragedy.

When we compose our definition of tragedy with Sophocles and Shakespeare as prime examples, the tragedies of Ibsen and Beckett look shrunken and shriveled. They have lost cosmic scope, universal significance—perhaps. Some critics say that with the death of man's confidence in man, tragedy died.

Of course it is difficult for tragedy to both reflect and speak to a world of disconnectedness and alienation and to also claim cosmic, "universally human" significance. But surely such tragedy may still be a very serious probing of someone's experience of inexplicable suffering, even the suffering of disconnectedness. Aeschylus gave us the titan Prometheus, chained to a cliff according to the will of Zeus, suffering physical agony for bringing the gifts of fire, reason, and science to men. Beckett gives us Gogo, a tramp with nowhere to go and nothing to do but wait, who suffers an illfitting boot. Who is to say who suffers more deeply?

A more important question: *Why* do they suffer? Oblivious to finely spun webs of pseudo-answers, this question sits brooding at the religious center of every powerful tragedy. Crushed between right and right, Creon laments, "...all things are crooked that I handle, / And a fate intolerable upon my life has lept." He took the fatal "mistep" himself, but his heart yearns to find some outside culprit—and finds that inscrutable fate may destroy a man from the outside as irrevocably as he may destroy himself.

Racine's Phèdre is annihilated by passion, by an irrational flaw, an ultimately inexplicable crack in the rational box of a Newtonian Universe. In what has been called Shakespeare's most christian tragedy, the sins of greed and murder which Macbeth himself commits are the evil core of the dark violence omened by thunder. Yet Macbeth is also egged on by his wife, lured and tricked by Fate and witches.

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Whose fault is it, really, that Osvald in Ibsen's *Ghosts* is reduced to idiocy by inherited syphillis? Society foisted a lie upon Willy Loman, but he brought tragedy upon himself not by fighting it, but by living the lie. "The man didn't know who he was." Could he have known? Was it his fault? Yes and no. That is the paradox—which is not ambivalence—of tragedy.

Perhaps in each case, some "fatal

flaw" led to ruin. Whether that flaw is related to fate, sin, society, or a malevolent cosmos depends on an understanding of the world peculiar to one playwright, one audience, one time. We must try to understand the flawedness and guilt in Oedipus by understanding early Greek-ness, and the flawedness and guilt in Death of a Salesman by understanding American-ness of the 1950's.

However, searching out some ostensible "fatal flaw" related to a culture and way of thinking leads us inevitably back to the mystery: Why the flaw, the fate, the sin, the society, the no-answer? Even more significantly, when we experience a powerful tragic play, we are troubled, touched, perhaps we find some emotional release. But we cannot name a villian and be satisfied with "hate," nor solve for ourselves the riddle of what-went-wrong. Though a dark "Why?" lurks within our sympathy, we do not attempt to answer it, for it is the life-force of the tragedy.

I speak here in religious terms. An honest and thorough critic will begin with a careful study of individual tragedies and then, if possible, forge definitions and conclusions to suit the whole genre. We will not now be working with the categories and definitions of painstaking dramatic criticism, though to work carefully and in detail, yet all the while in the context of religious terms would be ideal. But writing must begin somewhere.

We are trying to find out what tragic drama is, religiously speaking, and especially what it is or can be in the life of a christian community. Our beginning "definition" of tragedy was quite incomplete because it was made to order for 'this discussion. Hopefully it will illumine an aspect of the genre without warping our understanding of the whole. We repeat it: A tragedy is an aesthetic acting-out-event which seriously probes the experience of deserved-yet-undeserved suffering.

To say that a play is an aesthetic acting-out-event is dabbling a toe in deep theoretic water—which we shall also skirt. One might ask, for example, "Isn't the Macbeth that twelfth graders read the same tragedy that they might see as part of a play-audience event?" I think not, but we will leave that question in order to spend a bit more time with the meaning of aesthetic event.

The word tragedy has many meanings, and only one of them applies to drama. When a friend's husband and only child are killed in an accident, we call what happened a tragedy. However sad and shocked, our calling it tragic is very different from that woman's experience of tragic loss. Dramatic tragedy is something different still. It is not just a re-playing on stage of what was or could be a tragic event in real life. The playwright is not writing as a sad and shocked onlooker, nor even as victim of personal tragedy.

But he is intensely aware of human pain and defeat, of people shattered by grief, of irrevocable loss. As a human being, he experiences as anyone else. As a tragic playwright he understands and responds to suffering in a peculiar aesthetic way. He cares deeply, but he controls his emotion, pouring it into molds he carefully forges. How he does it is a mystery. (From time to time, rules for the successful writing of tragic plays have been laid out—and from time to time great tragedians have trampled them.)

The tragic playwright's finished "product," when we experience it, tells us, among other things, that suffering and brokenness are real. But it does not tell us exactly that, because it does not tell us that in so many words; nor do we simply "feel" it. It comes to us, the what-it-is of this tragedy, and we perceive, understand, and feel it aesthetically. What exactly "aesthetically" means is another mystery (for now, anyway). But we can be sure, at least, that a tragedy is not essentially entertaining, nor educational, nor emotionally cathartic.

Tragedy does say something though, seriously and probingly. A story happens, is played out in nearly the way the playwright intended. He intended, for example, that there be three acts and an ominous beginning, that this woman speak craftily, that man sullenly, that a gesture belie a speech, and so forth. The play is a work of art; it hangs together and means only because the artist puts the pieces together so that they fit. This artistic or aesthetic whole is never unrelated to life, because, as we have noted, the artist begins with everyday life. And even his artistic doing is done every day just as a banker does his money-counting. And the artist, like everyone, lives all of his life religiously. He does not neutrally sense the suffering around him. He either believes that God created and redeems a now sin-broken world, or he does not. When he does his artistic work, he does it either in the framework of a life of obedience or of disobedience to God. Thus, in every tragedy, the playwright also "intends," though perhaps not consciously, a religious belief about the meaning of life and the world.

Often a tragic hero will, before our eyes, unwittingly step toward his own destruction. Escape becomes—or was from the beginning—impossible. The playwright, in accord with his own religiously and culturally based understanding of the structure of life, will ensure that Zeus, Fate, Society, or some inherent disease or irrational/sinful flaw is held as responsible for the final fall as the hero is. The tragedy cannot happen without impetus, or without some kind of pattern. But no matter what the impetus or pattern, the question remains: Why should it happen at all? Why must a hero take a wrong step, not know who he is? He did not *wish* to lose control, to commit mortal sin, to get sucked into the game. But he did. The punishment, if it be such, is far in excess of the crime.

"Just as He created Adam and Eve, God creates us—flesh, bone, heart, intellect, imagination. We are not made to escape from the earth; He gave it to us as our *home*. Someday He will purify it and us, but even now, we cannot begin to be fully human; we cannot begin to honour Him by being what He meant us to be, until we begin to put all of what we are—including our imagination and aesthetic sense—into action in His creation."

Perhaps it is common to human feeling that if any part (if the *root*) of suffering seems undeserved, then the whole situation seems unjust, out-of-joint. Thus the seeming deservedness of a tragic fall or tragic situation may be only superficial, just the impetus, perhaps a bit of red herring.

Then what we find at the religious center of every tragedy, no matter what its cultural context, is this: a deeply troubled and persistent "Why?" which boils up out of the conviction that the brokenness and hurt of human life is *not* deserved. In the face of brokenness and defeat, a powerful tragedy invariably pits a kind of wholeness and human dignity—whether the dignity of Prometheus or of Vladimir and Estragon. But a tragic "necessity" or "fate" has won out from the beginning. Necessity makes itself felt when a man's will is not free, when a man is restricted to a certain course by the will of the gods, by a curse upon him, by a flaw within himself, by an evil environment. Necessity makes itself felt when a man finds himself in a tragic dilemma—the choice, for example, between ignoble life or noble death. He feels, "Life being what it is, the events could happen no other way." In a moment--perhaps a long one—of truth or horror, a man realizes experientially that the undeserved suffering part of life-as-it-is is irrevocably breaking upon his own head.

The Christian knows the root of all suffering by its name: sin. Man was created in beauty and dignity, in the image of God. But man sinned. And he suffers a curse. A law of sin (which might feel like "necessity") works unlawfully within the framework of God's cosmos, wreaking a painful brokenness; jagged edges mangle the skin and bone of both the unjust and the just. The Christian does not need to write tragedy to ask the question "Why?" nor to tentatively lay the blame upon some force outside of his humanity.

But does knowing the origin of brokenness diminish the hurt of it? We have said that tragedy has to do with the experience of deserved-yet-undeserved suffering. That is extremely significant. Like every human being, a Christian suffers times of grief and defeat. Does knowing that we shall all live together again in a new heaven and earth fill the lonely emptiness left by the untimely death of someone dear to us? We sin and fall and God forgives and restores. But the results of our sin, like the fruit of David's sin with Bathsheba, may be inescapable sorrow and destruction.

During the experience of suffering, in the moments of anguish, we cry out, "Why?" feeling heartdeep that we, God's children, were not created for this, that it's all wrong, knowing that there is no answer but a theological one: Man sinned...God allows.... Does a theological/rational answer ease the agony of a moment of truth or horror? Of course, for a Christian, any experience, no matter how painful, may be qualified by a surrounding, sustaining experience of the presence and love of God. Even then, is it wrong to cry out against a curse, or against an unlawful law of sin unto death when a part of us dies in its clutch?

Later we look back upon the experience of suffering and perhaps we are able to wrap it into a bundle and give it a label that "makes sense": "a time of testing," perhaps even, "all for the good." True statements, but they are not the experience. They are not even close, compared to an artist's "statement" about experience. We have said that an artist's peculiarly imaginative/aesthetic response is a response to experience, meaning by that that his art is never at heart a reflection of theory—whether social, political, theological or ethical theory, except insofar as such theories may have become worked out in patterns and attitudes of life.

An artist's aesthetic response to the experience of (deserved-yet-undeserved) suffering—what is it worth? Basically, that question is but a form of a more general question that has been asked and answered in many forms. The general question: What good is any art to a Christian community? The answer could become long and involved, but this short defense of art for Christians rests upon only one premise: our created, human, in-this-worldness. Just as He created Adam and Eve, God creates us--flesh, bone, heart, intellect, imagination. We are not made to escape from the earth; He gave it to us as our home. Someday He will purify it and us, but even now, we cannot begin to be fully human; we cannot begin to honour Him by being what He meant us to be, until we begin to put all of what we are—including our imagination and aesthetic sense--into action in His creation.

Terror, loveliness, isolation, grace, balance, color, tenderness, awe, rhythm, jubilation are all part of our experience of life. But many things do not touch our imaginations or awaken in us the gift of seeing beauty until an artist does us the grace of crystallizing and polishing them. We could get along without art just as we could get along without numbers. But we would not then be accepting God's gifts to us very graciously—or responsibly.

Tragedy, like other forms of art,

symbolically crystallizes and clarifies aspects of the experience of life common to humanity. A man who lives in disobedience to God still shares humanness and the earth with us, and the tragedy he writes may be such a powerful and subtle symbolic crystallization of our own and our neighbor's amorphous wisps and thunderheads of experience that we can only sit after it's over and feel "Yes," no matter how troubling the "truth" of it. However, we will also know upon reflection that tragedy written in the spirit of a life of rebellion against God will be rotten somewhere. Its sense of truth about the world and man will be warped, and if it suggests an answer, the answer will be the wrong one. And so we must study, test, prove, and divide the true from the rotten; we must call the rotten rotten and not let it infect us. But we cannot deny that God lets disbeliever and believer alike touch and imaginatively handle the sometimes beautiful, sometimes awful meanings of life on earth.

> "...the artist, like everyone, lives all of his life religiously. He does not neutrally sense the suffering around him.... Thus, in every tragedy, the playwright also "intends," though perhaps not consciously, a religious belief about the meaning of life and the world."

Perhaps we must also admit that believers have been afraid to imaginatively handle, to probe, to play with, to aesthetically mold the experience of life. Why? Perhaps because they have forgotten that walking before the face of God is a day-to-day living experience, not a set of rules. Why should we be afraid that life's deepest meanings, confronted head-on, will belie our theology--unless our lives are not really transformed and ordered by what we "believe"? An artist cannot draw art from theory about life, not even from theology. "Distinctively christian" art can only arise out of distinctively christian experience. But then we might better differentiate it from art done by disbelievers by calling it "art more true to reality" than by calling it "christian art."

With that in mind, we approach the question, "Can a Christian write tragedy?" Sometimes just looking around at our world—at the ratio of sin to grace and of pain to peace—convinces us that sensitive Christians must write tragedy. Christians themselves suffer, as we have said. The experience of suffering is there, and we should not be afraid to turn it over in our imaginations, to probe it with words, to mold it into colors and rhythms. We should not be afraid, because the experience of grace is always there too, surrounding and supporting. Whether grace symbolized must be a part of every probing symbolizing of suffering is a question not easily resolved. Another hard question: Can suffering and grace ever combine to form that elusive thing called "tragedy"?

Hypothetical answers do not mean much, but this one may add some substance to our discussion. Many critics find essential to tragedy not only suffering but also the worth of the human being who suffers (the suffering is "undeserved," in the sense we have discussed). A powerful tragedy may leave us troubled, but it will also leave us uplifted by the dignity and courage—despite everything--of a human being. This glorification of humanity is only hinted at, but it forms and colors the whole play. Perhaps (speaking crudely) a christian artist could substitute for a subtle pervasive glorification of man who suffers with dignity, a subtle, pervasive honouring of God who gives redeemed man the grace to suffer with dignity.

Whether such a work could be called a "tragedy" does not really matter. Perhaps it could "tell" us, as no sermon could, that grace is a small gift until it is lived and pitted against the messy, frustrating, painful reality of sin.