

UNTRAGIC AMERICA

Our Democratic Faith Needs Correcting If We are
to Produce Great Tragic Drama

After 12 years of silence, a new drama by our No. 1 playwright, Eugene O'Neill, is an event. But this one, The Iceman Cometh, prompts the reflection that no first-rate American tragedy has ever been written, not even by O'Neill. This despite the fact that the world has been steeped in tragedy for many years and despite the fact that all the characters in The Iceman are miserable specimens indeed. Instead of the ennobling effect that tragedy is supposed to give, The Iceman is more like a cosmic bellyache. And O'Neill's best plays, as a writer in Theatre Arts magazine has pointed out, are not so much real tragedies as "dramatizations of the tragic fact that man has lost sight of his own greatness."

America's failure to create first-rate tragedies may not seem like a national disaster. Yet dramatic tragedy has been the chosen medium of history's greatest artists, and our failure in it may betoken some deeper failure in the American **character** or scene. A people who cannot witness great reminders of the tragic aspect of their own existence are not getting the most out of life and perhaps cannot be ranked among the greatest civilizations. The people of Athens and of Shakespeare's England were able to suffer vicariously with their tragic heroes in an emotional workout that left them wiser and more serene. That, said Aristotle, is the purpose of tragedy--to purge the emotions through pity and fear. But Americans disapprove of fear and want to free the world of it. Are we an essentially untragic people?

W h a t i s T r a g e d y ?

First, a few definitions, necessarily domestic. According to Aristotle, the first authority on the subject, tragedy must be "serious, complete and of a certain magnitude," to which Webster's dictionary adds that the hero "is by some passion or limitation brought to a catastrophe," the action as a whole working out as "a manifestation of fate." Strictly speaking, first-rate tragedy has been written in only two eras by only four men: by Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides in the 5th Century B.C. and by Shakespeare. Grade B tragedy (still very fine stuff) has been achieved by Corneille, Racine, Goethe, Ibsen and others, including composers of 19th Century opera; and you can grade it on down from there. But high tragedy must not be confused with pathos, gloom or a mere unhappy ending.

A key word in Aristotle's definition is "magnitude." The Greek and Shakespearean heroes were princes, kings or generals at least, outsize characters whose fate involved the fate of whole cities or nations with their own. Compare King Oedipus or King Lear with what passes for a tragic hero on the American stage-- the clerk-hero of Elmer Rice's Adding Machine, significantly named Mr. Zero, or the monotic Lennie in Steinbeck's Of Mice and Men. Our heroes appeal not to our awe but to our power of sympathetic identification. Aided by naturalistic settings and dialog, we are above all made to feel at home, among equals or inferiors. The characters on our stage and screen may be rich and admirable, but we are always reminded of their humble origin, their warts or some other comfortable and exceedingly nontragic flaw. The Iceman carries this democratic snobbism about as far as it can be carried: the characters all start out as a bunch of drunken bums and finish the same.

The requirement of "magnitude," which our drama fails to meet, suggests that ~~xxxxxxxxxxx~~ great tragedy may be incompatible with American democracy. Except at the Sinatra-fan level, we don't really believe in heroes, and when they appear among us anyway we unfit them for tragedy by cutting them down to size. Just as reacted to the phenomenon of Hitler by singing Der Führer's Face, so we debunk our own heroes, good or bad. American fiction has produced a few characters, such as Ahab in Moby Dick, who are of truly tragic magnitude. But the typical American reader tries to get around Ahab by dubbing him a fanatic.

One reason for the greatness of Ahab and for the high seriousness of much Victorian literature in comparison with our own was that our forebears shared a deep Christian sense of sin. This sense of sin was related to a sense of man's cosmic importance, which we seem to have lost. To a Greek, also, man was the center of the universe; his very gods had manlike attributes and were constantly involving themselves in man's affairs, whether guiding him in battle or making love to his wife. But modern man has moved from the center of the universe and reduced himself to a trivial biological specimen. He cannot esteem himself highly enough for high tragedy. He can appraise, analyze, respect and belittle himself, but he cannot regard himself with awe.

Without awe, tragedy cannot achieve its greatest impact. And it may be that our belief that all men are equal, our refusal to admit the very concept of aristocracy, debars us from ever ~~xxx~~ feeling the awe that the Athenians felt toward Oedipus or the Elizabethan groundlings toward Lear. In that case our failure to produce great tragedy may be a virtue, or at least a fair price to pay for our democracy. Maybe we are more like the Romans, who also had great political gifts and never produced any great

tragedy either.

Yet democracy does produce heroes, and our history is replete with tragic themes. These themes and heroes may make great American tragedy if we get over our belittling habit and admit to ourselves that the average man is not the measure of all things. But even that won't be enough. For while great tragedy is not necessarily incompatible with democracy, it is incompatible with another habit that lies deep in the American grain.

T H E I d e a o f P r o g r e s s

This habit is an optimistic faith in progress. Professor J. B. Bury, who wrote a history of The Idea of Progress, defines it to mean "that civilization has moved, is moving and will move in a desirable direction." This idea is only about as old as modern science, stemming from Bacon and Descartes. But it has as firm a grip on the modern world as the expectation of the Judgment Day had on the medieval world. And except among Russian Communists (for Marx swallowed it whole) the idea of progress has nowhere taken deeper root than in America.

Now why is this idea incompatible with high tragedy? Because we have let it replace the old convictions on which tragedy depends, that man is finite (or sinful) and that his destiny does not lie wholly in his own hands. The idea of progress grew from the observable fact of science's increasing conquest of material nature. But Darwin, Herbert Spencer and others stretched this observable fact into certain unprovable assumptions: namely, that "all environments [Darwin's words] will tend to progress toward perfection," that man himself is perfectible through scientific knowledge and that evil is not a permanent necessity in the world. Even devout men like Tennyson, whose Locksley Hall is the battle hymn of progress, could promote the new faith by assuming God was on its side.

As indeed He may be. But there is increasing evidence to the contrary. There is also evidence that the underpinnings of our faith in progress may be weakening, for the scientists themselves are no longer so sure. The leading physicists have long since regained an almost primitive awe of the universe, and H. G. Wells renudiated a lifelong worship of progress before he left a world for which his final epithet was "doomed formicary." Bury's book was written a generation before the atomic bomb, but the bomb gives these words of his a new point: "If there were good cause for believing that the earth would be uninhabitable in A.D. 2000 or 2100, the doctrine of Progress would lose its meaning and would automatically disappear."

R e v e r s a l o f V a l u e s

To gain a sense of tragedy, Americans must therefore virtually reverse two of their dearest values: on the one hand, we must recover our awareness of evil, uncertainty and fear; on the other, we must gain a sense of man's occasional greatness (which is quite a different thing from "the dignity of the common man"). For tragedy, in essence, is the spectacle of a great man confronting his own finiteness and being punished for letting his reach exceed his grasp. The Greeks had two words for this--hybris, pride, and moira, fate--which told them that subtle dangers lurk in all human achievements and that the bigger they are the harder they fall. But if Americans believe that there are no insoluble questions, they can't ask tragic questions. And if they believe that punishment is only for ignorance or inadequate effort, they can't give tragic answers. They can't have the tragic sense.

That sense is to feel a due humility before the forces that are able to humble us, without wishing to avoid the contest where the humbling may take place. We will be a more civilized people when we get it.