

THE PEDIGREE OF HOGAN'S CLASSES OF TRAGEDY

Experimental Tragedy

Euripides
Shakespeare
O'Casey
Williams

Austere Tragedy

Sophocles
Racine
Ibsen
Miller

“Some playwrights have complained that the drama is one of the more naive forms of art, and many, many playwrights have complained that dramatic criticism is one of the most naive forms of criticism. Probably a prime example of that critical naiveté is the centuries old and apparently fruitless battle about the nature of tragedy. In our time that battle has hovered around the cliché that tragedy cannot be written in the modern world. Modern man, so the argument goes, has shriveled in stature; his society has somehow lessened the significance of his soul in contrast to Athenian or Elizabethan society which apparently did not make moral dwarfs of Athenians or Elizabethans. In this view, modern man is equated with Elmer Rice's Mr. Zero or one of Rossum's Universal Robots. Naturally, the events which happen to such ciphers can scarcely have the intensity of meaning of those events which happened to Oedipus and Lear.”

Robert Hogan, *Arthur Miller*, U of Minnesota Pamphlets on American Writers, 40 (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1964), 5.

The term 'robot' first appeared in the 1921 play R.U.R. by Czech playwright Karel Capek and derives from the Czech word *roboaa*, 'drudgery,' akin to the Russian *robot*, 'to work.'

A Mini-bibliography

By Miller

All My Sons, 1947
An Enemy of the People, 1950
The Crucible, 1953
A Memory of Two Mondays, 1955
A View from the Bridge, 1955-56
The Misfits, 1961
After the Fall, 1964
Incident at Vichy, 1964
The Creation of the World & Other Business, 1972

On Miller

Tom F. Driver, “Strength and Weakness in Arthur Miller.” *Tulane Drama Review*, IV (May 1960), 105-113.
Arthur Miller. “Tragedy and the Common Man.” *The New York Times*, 27 Feb. 1949, II, 1,3.
Paul N. Siegel. “Willy Loman and King Lear.” *College English*, XVII (March 1956), 341-45.
Gerald Weales, ed. *Death of a Salesman: Text and Criticism*. Viking, 1967.
Dennis Welland. *Arthur Miller*. Grove, 1961

ARTHUR MILLER

Tragedy and the Common Man

‘the common man is as apt a subject for tragedy in its highest sense as kings were’

In this age few tragedies are written. It has often been held that the lack is due to a paucity of heroes among us, or else that modern man has had the blood drawn out of his organs of belief by the skepticism of science, and the heroic attack on life cannot feed on an attitude of reserve and circumspection. For one reason or another, we are often held to be below tragedy—or tragedy above us. The inevitable conclusion is, of course, that the tragic mode is archaic, fit only for the very highly placed, the kings or the kingly, and where this admission is not made in so many words it is most often implied.

I believe that the common man is as apt a subject for tragedy in its highest sense as kings were. On the face of it this ought to be obvious in the light of modern psychiatry, which bases its analysis upon classic formulations, such as the Œdipus and Orestes complexes, for instances, which were enacted by royal beings, but which apply to everyone in similar emotional situations.

More simply, when the question of tragedy in art is not at issue, we never hesitate to attribute to the well-placed and the exalted the very same mental processes as the lowly. And finally, if the exaltation of tragic action were truly a property of the high-bred character alone, it is inconceivable that the mass of mankind should cherish tragedy above all other forms, let alone be capable of understanding it.

‘Tragedy, then, is the consequence of a man's total compulsion to evaluate himself justly’

As a general rule, to which there may be exceptions unknown to me, I think the tragic feeling is evoked in us when we are in the presence of a character who is ready to lay down his life, if need be, to secure one thing—his sense of personal dignity. From Orestes to Hamlet, Medea to Macbeth, the underlying struggle is that of the individual attempting to gain his “rightful” position in his society.

Sometimes he is one who has been displaced from it, sometimes one who seeks to attain it for the first time, but the fateful wound from which the inevitable events spiral is the wound of indignity, and its dominant force is indignation. Tragedy, then, is the consequence of a man's total compulsion to evaluate himself justly.

In the sense of having been initiated by the hero himself, the tale always reveals what has been called his “tragic flaw,” a failing that is not peculiar to grand or elevated characters. Nor is it necessarily a weakness. The flaw, or crack in the character, is really nothing—and need by nothing—but his inherent unwillingness to remain passive in the face of what he conceives to be a challenge to his dignity, his image of his rightful states. Only the passive, only those who accept their lot without active retaliation, are “flawless.” Most of us are in that category.