

# *The Persistence of Tragedy*

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*A complex view, reflecting the modern critical approach.*

*The Vision of Tragedy*, by Richard Benson Sewall. *New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959.*

PROFESSOR SEWALL'S BOOK effectively accomplishes several goals. It defines tragedy; it discusses eight tragic works in some detail; it demonstrates "not only the possibility but the existence of true tragic writing in our time"; and, incidentally, it sweeps through the evolution of tragedy. Chronologically organized, the eight specific discussions are linked where necessary by brief chapters filling in historical lacunae in the tragic spectrum.

The minimal definition of tragedy appears in a brief chapter discussing the relationship between evil, suffering, and values. In the practical discussions, the emphasis varies. The basic questions are: Is there a protagonist confronted with evil? Does he choose to act, and persevere in his opposition to the implications of the initial situation? Does he suffer, and thereby in some sense learn? Does the work as a whole maintain the co-existence of evil and good, affirming the value of the latter without denying the existence of the former? To the extent that these questions may be answered "yes," a work is tragic.

Professor Sewall observes these qualities in the *Book of Job*. Job, by questioning,

opposes the vision his suffering implies. The body of the discussion argues that Job's concept of his problem ever enlarges, in spite of occasional backslidings. The vision of God, the ultimate mystery behind suffering, is therefore within the tragic expansion of *Job*. Sophocles' Oedipus also pursues the truth about himself relentlessly, and in his self-blinding does something about it. Unlike the Hebraic poet, the Greek is unconcerned with the gods, whom he takes for granted; but Oedipus, like Job, has faced suffering aggressively, and emerged a bigger man. *Job* and *Oedipus* have affected every subsequent tragedy in Western literature. *Job* is the archetype of tragedy concerned with judgment, or eschatology, and *Oedipus* is the archetype of tragedy concerned with actuality, or ontology.

The advent of Christianity had ambivalent implications for the possibility of tragedy. The emphasis on Redemption and Atonement, on the next life, is anti-tragic; but the danger of infinite damnation and the crisis of choice between belief and non-belief open new tragic possibilities. Marlowe's Faustus faces the alternatives offered by Christianity, and, impelled by the Renaissance impulse toward knowledge and mastery of the world, makes an agonizing choice. Throughout the play, the audience is forced to experience the choice as Faustus is continually forced to face the issue again, and to reaffirm it. Therefore, it is impossible to accept his final condemnation as unequivocally just. Faustus too learns, becoming capable of a direct vision of the universe of Christ's mercy and of damnation.

Lear finds the punishment of his folly excessive. He heroically pursues his justification beyond common sense, into the storm and madness. His perseverance brings new perception to Lear, thereby asserting value in the midst of evil. In *King Lear* as a

whole, neither evil nor good triumphs, but the reconciliation with Cordelia and the goodness of assorted minor characters balance the evils in whose context they emerge.

AFTER THE RENAISSANCE (and Racine), the next real tragedy appears in nineteenth-century America. The reasons for this lapse are various mixtures of simple-mindedness rather than complexity, inability to imagine evil, and dogmatic optimism. But in *The Scarlet Letter* the unresolved ethical complexity of tragedy reappears. Hester reaches no easy solution to the question of what it means to be, but she has acted out an answer.

The structure of *Moby-Dick* is complicated by the use of Ishmael as a bridge from the normal world to the tragic world dominated by Ahab as tragic hero. Ahab's non-tragic demonism is qualified by his "melting moods . . . introspection and self-doubt"; by his conviction that he is assuming the burden of mankind; in his own statements of the duality of good and evil; and in his final reconciliation with himself.

"Ideally, tragedy reveals simultaneously, in one complete action, man's total possibilities and his most grievous limitations." In modern tragedy such as *The Brothers Karamazov*, the hero's plight is particularly obscure; his problem is not to choose between values, but to find any at all. Dmitri and Ivan pursue their own natures, motivated by sensualism and by cynical rationalism respectively, to a new understanding in which value has been created. However, though capable of learning through suffering, neither is ready to preserve the vision permanently. Alyosha too has bitter experiences and moments of doubt, and only limited success in the world. But it is his brothers who find, if only temporarily, tragic truth—"fragmentary, tentative, and precarious."

The paucity of tragedy in the twentieth

century is the failure of our contemporaries to see man "in all his relationships . . . and in all his possibilities as well as limitations." Faulkner, however, fully develops the tragic crisis in all its implications. In *Absalom, Absalom*, the story of Thomas Sutpen constitutes the crisis of a "full and tragic realization by Quentin of the paradox of his Southern heritage, and the dilemma of man, with which he must somehow come to terms and cannot." Thomas and Henry Sutpen are the agents, the tragic heroes in the active sense. But they do not understand their own histories, and the impact and meaning of their actions is suffered by Quentin. His is the initiation into the ambiguity, the ambivalence of the human situation.

The legitimacy of Professor Sewall's self-consciously "inductive" method as a device for achieving theoretical clarity may be questioned. As might be expected, the most precise strokes in the definition of tragedy occur in explicit generalizations. The effect of the method is simply to scatter the total definition throughout the book. However, the purpose of practical criticism is well served. The effort toward definition which appears in each discussion duplicates, at the critical level, the effort toward perception which characterizes the works themselves. Also, the inductive method maintains the essentially *ad hoc* nature of crea-

tive criticism, in which the critical tool is shaped by the work it carves.

Another virtue lies in the somewhat tantalizing historical implications. In *Job*, *Oedipus*, and *Faustus*, the hero's growth is the structure of the play; in subsequent works, it is not. In *Faustus*, the infinite intensification of moral alternatives offered by Christianity appears. By the time of *The Scarlet Letter* and *Moby-Dick* the author must define a frame of reference for his audience. Dostoevski's heroes have to create the alternatives they will choose from in a world where all values have disappeared; and in *Absalom, Absalom* the tragic hero is virtually split.

In conclusion, Professor Sewall's book is in the main stream of contemporary criticism. The tragic vision is a complex one, paradoxical, ambiguous, precariously between the forces of good and evil, and acknowledging both without resolution; and it is communicated by the entire dramatic dialectic. However, his emphasis on complexity is clearly directed to the reality the tragic vision grapples with. The relationship between the tensions in art and the tensions in the actual world has in this writer's opinion been implicit in almost all modern criticism, but here it is explicit. It is shown as an enduring quality of "the existential vision, the radical response to the life-situation."

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### *General Announcements*

WE ARE PLEASED to report that your editors have received many expressions of interest and approval of the Burke newsletter, from both laymen and academic specialists, and that there is a wide consensus in favor of our policy of appealing to as broad an area of interests as possible. We feel that this policy is sound, because it reflects the extensive range of interests of Burke himself. He has been read by the public at large, and in our universities he is studied in political science, history, literature, philosophy, and speech.

For the past nine months we have been compiling a master list of persons interested in Burke studies, and of societies which may well include a place for Burke in their